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Simeng Wang

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# Chinese in France amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

Daily Lives, Racial Struggles and  
Transnational Citizenship of Migrants  
and Descendants

Edited by  
**Simeng WANG**

Preface by **JING Jun**  
Postface by **François HÉRAN**



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*Daily Lives, Racial Struggles and Transnational  
Citizenship of Migrants and Descendants*

*Edited by*

Simeng WANG

*Preface by*

Jun JING

*Postface by*

François HÉRAN

*With contributions from*

Francesco MADRISOTTI, Yong LI, Xiabing CHEN, Ran YAN



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LEIDEN | BOSTON



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## Preface

This volume of studies, *Chinese in France amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: Daily Lives, Racial Struggles and Transnational Citizenship of Migrants and Descendants*, is a timely contribution to the worldwide research efforts to capture and record the impact of the Covid-19 virus upon humanity in general and the Chinese diaspora in France in particular. Authors of the following 12 chapters have effectively employed survey methods, media analysis, observation studies, in-depth interviews, and action research in presenting a wide range of issues that underlined the Chinese diaspora's response to a pandemic that originated in the city of Wuhan in December 2019. Because of their close connections with friends, colleagues, parents and siblings in China, many of the Chinese in France were deeply alarmed by the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan and the virus's spread to other parts of China, while most people in France remained relatively calm and even indifferent. Alarm led to actions, involving efforts of constantly looking for new information, sending masks and medical supplies from France to hospitals in China, and setting up a hotline in Paris for Chinese-speaking populations. Chinese medical professionals working in France had the foresight to translate Chinese-language Covid-19 diagnostic and treatment protocols into French, so that their French-speaking colleagues could consult these materials in preparation for what eventually became a global crisis. In reading the different chapters, one finds some common themes and unique situations. Of the common themes, solidarity and discrimination stand out in sharp contrast. After the pandemic hit France, a number of hotel managers of Chinese origin offered free lodging to police officers working on double shifts, while Chinese business communities launched a food relief program, which first served only Chinese-speaking populations and then quickly catered to people of mixed ethnic identities. In the meanwhile, many people of Chinese descent reported overt discrimination because of their ethnicity and their ties to China. In a country where authorities don't want to talk about ethnicity but a sociocultural totality of French citizens, the Covid-19 pandemic was a catalyst that made racism more visible than in the past. Led by a group of intellectuals including scholars of Chinese origin, an anti-racism campaign was undertaken in Paris, and one of the counter measures in this campaign was to report overt cases of discrimination to authorities. In the first half of 2021, five men went on trial in Paris for tweeting threatening, hateful messages about people of Chinese descent. For those readers are unfamiliar with the politics of ethnicity and the Chinese diaspora in France, they may wonder why some of the writers in this volume resort to an analytic trope by describing the Chinese diaspora according to three main categories of migratory statuses, namely those of

nonnaturalized migrants, naturalized French citizens of Chinese origin, and people of Chinese descent who were born in France. Further categories include linguistically distinctive groups of people from Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos) who identify themselves as “Chinese”. In other words, the Chinese diaspora in France is rather complex because of different migration waves, which started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with a small group of Chinese businessmen and has continued with the arrival of new immigrants up to now. For those who had been born as French citizens and attended the French school system, they found anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism most difficult to endure psychologically, because their strong sense of self identity as fully French with equal rights as other French citizens. Put differently, this volume of studies translucently informs of us how the Chinese diaspora in France dealt with the impact of Covid-19. In addition, it provides us with a magnifying glass to observe the nuances that are embedded in the many challenges to human equality in a society that prides itself as a nation of citizens.

*JING Jun*

Tsinghua University, Beijing, 2023

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This book is about the lived experiences of Chinese people who have resided in France during the Covid-19 pandemic. First we thank the participants in our research project and the people who helped us in recruiting participants. We are grateful for the trust they placed in us by sharing their experiences with us and recommending our study, regardless of their gender, age, profession, or migratory status.

We are grateful to the French National Research Agency (ANR), which generously funded the collective Research Project “Chinese Migration in France Facing the Covid-19 Pandemic: the Emergence of New Forms of Solidarity in Times of Crisis” (abbreviated as MigraChiCovid; ANR-20-COVI-0046-01, 2020–2022). We also thank the institutions that provided support throughout this project, in particular the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the Center for Research on Medicine, Science, Health, Mental Health, and Society (CERMES3).

Thanks are also due to all our colleagues and academic peers who provided stimulating work surroundings and discussed the progress of the project and the findings with us on a regular or ad hoc basis. First, we thank the members of the scientific board who followed the evolution of our project from its inception to completion: Jing Jun (Tsinghua University, China), Jean-Paul Gaudillière (French National Institute of Health and Medical Research – INSERM and School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences – EHESS, France), Frédéric Keck (CNRS, France), Winnie Lem (Trent University, Canada), Emmanuel Ma Mung (CNRS, France), and Patrick Simon (French Institute for Demographic Studies – INED, France). We appreciate their helpful comments on our talks, papers, and book chapters.

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the great share? Crises, globalization, health systems and the politics of need” at the EHESS, the collective “Facing the first wave of the Covid pandemic-19: the orientations and modes of the Humanities and social sciences research” of the Institute of Human and Social Sciences (InSHS) of the CNRS, the French Association of Political Science (AFSP); in China, the Center for Chinese Entrepreneur Studies (CCES) at Tsinghua University, the Office of the CNRS in China, the School of International Studies and the Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies at Jinan University, the School of Social Sciences at Tsinghua University; and in Europe and the US, the ChinaWhite research team at the University of Amsterdam, the research center “East Asian Studies” (EAST) of the Free University of Brussels (ULB), the seminar on Chinese Studies research unit at Leuven University, projection of documentaries and debates organized by the University of Florence at the Festival d’Europa 2022, the Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees (CESSMIR) at Ghent University, the China Studies Meetings Webinar at the University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE), the China Centre Seminar Series (Oxford China Conversations), the Working Group 5 of the COST action (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) CHERN (China in Europe), the Asia Pacific Center at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), the “Medicine and Its Objects” Workshop at the University of Chicago, and the Comparative Health Humanities Symposium held at Northeastern University and Harvard University.

Numerous people and organizations helped us to disseminate our research results beyond academia: media, associations, political decision-makers, and the general public. We offer them warm thanks: *Association des Jeunes Chinois de France* (AJCF), *Association Chinois de France, Français de Chine* (CFFC), *Grand équipement documentaire* (GED) became *Humathèque* at the Condorcet Campus, France Culture Radio, *KOï* magazine, *Musée National de l’Histoire de l’Immigration* (MNHI), French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH), *Mission d’information sur l’émergence et l’évolution des différentes formes de racisme et les réponses à y apporter* at the French National Assembly. Sincere appreciation is extended to all artists—film makers and photographers—who participated in the project, as, without them, we could not have produced the documentary *Between Two Worlds: the Chinese Diaspora in France in the Time of Covid-19* and two photography exhibitions.

This book is the fruit of a long writing process by five contributors representing the MigraChiCovid team. We are grateful for the work of other team members: Tamara Lui, Chloé Luu, Johann Cailhol, the film makers Wen Yao Wang and Yulin Li, an intern, Hannah Bramekamp, and an assistant, Cai Chen. We also thank those involved in turning the manuscript into a published book: Debra

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*Simeng Wang, Francesco Madrisotti, Yong Li, Xiabing Chen, and Ran Yan*

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## Notes on Contributors

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### *Yong Li*

holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Rouen (2016). After his dissertation on the labour market integration of Chinese graduates in France, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Employment and Labour Studies and the Triangle Laboratory, ENS Lyon. He is a member of the Dysolab at the University of Rouen and a fellow of the French Collaborative Institute on Migration. His current work revolves around three main themes: the life courses of skilled Chinese migrants in France; anti-Asian racism in France; transnational e-commerce among Chinese migrants in Europe.

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### *Simeng Wang*

is a sociologist, permanent research fellow at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), faculty member at the CERMES3 (Research Centre, Medicine, Science, Health, Mental Health and Society) and fellow with the French Collaborative Institute on Migration. She has been working on Chinese migration to France since 2009 and has published extensively on the subject: among others *Chinese Migrants in Paris. The Narratives of Illusion and Suffering* (Brill, 2021) and *Chinese Immigrants in Europe: Image, Identity and Social Participation* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2020). She is also the coordinator of the research network Migration from East and Southeast Asia in France (MAF).

*Ran Yan*

holds a Master's degree in communication from Sciences Po Paris. Since 2018, she has been working as a journalist based in Paris for a Chinese TV channel, mainly covering topics related to French-Chinese cooperation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she reported on the collection of medical materials by alumni of Wuhan University in France and racism experienced by Chinese migrants. Her interests cover the cultural differences, the cooperation between China and France, as well as Chinese people in France.

## INTRODUCTION

# Between Two Worlds: the Chinese Diaspora in France during Covid-19

*Simeng Wang and Francesco Madrisotti*

### Abstract

In the introduction, it is firstly recalled the social and historical context of the Covid-19 pandemic and explicated why authors chose to examine the pandemic through the perspective of the diaspora studies and in particular from the perspective of the Chinese diaspora in France. After a presentation of the specificities of the Chinese diaspora in France, the introduction draws up the key study question of the whole book: studying the differentiated experiences of the pandemic among the Chinese population in France, according to their migratory status (nonnaturalized migrants, French naturalized migrants and descendants of migrants) and other social relationships; placing these experiences in the context of what is happening in France, China and the rest of the world. As background, it is crucial to understand the different social construction of the Covid-19 pandemic in China and in France. Afterwards, the MigraChiCovid project's genesis, mixed methodology and qualitative and quantitative data are introduced. The introduction is concluded with the presentation of the three sections and the brief summaries of the twelve book chapters.

### Keywords

Chinese diaspora in France – Covid-19 pandemic – migrants – descendants – daily experiences – everyday practices – stigmatization – racism – solidarity – social construction of Covid-19 – social differentiation – citizenship – mobilization – relationship to the home and living countries – photographic exhibitions – documentary film – MigraChiCovid project – methodology – quantitative and qualitative data – online and offline surveys

The Covid-19 virus was first reported in December 2019, in the city of Wuhan, in Hubei Province (Zhou et al., 2020). After a period of uncertainty, in January 2020 Chinese political and medical authorities took strong measures in order

to contain the spread of the virus and manage the health crisis: a general lockdown in and around Hubei, mobilization of thousands of physicians and nurses from all the country, construction of new hospitals, and so on. Despite these measures, within three months, the virus had begun to spread worldwide.

On March 11, 2020, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), characterized Covid-19 as a pandemic, based on its spread across three continents, Europe, Asia, and North America. In January and February 2020, European governments reassuringly stated that the situation was under control and that their health systems were prepared to deal with the spread of the virus. But infection with the virus intensified and caused rapid deterioration in the conditions in many countries. At the beginning of March 2020, Italy became the first country in Europe to implement unprecedented measures by imposing a local and then a national lockdown. Other countries in the European Union quickly followed suit, with similar countermeasures around mid-March 2020. These policies included banning public gatherings, closing public places and institutions, restrictions on travel locally, nationally, and internationally, and lockdowns.

On March 16, 2020, Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, announced a two-week lockdown period to begin the following day, with the aim of “flattening the curve” (i.e., reducing exponential increases in infection) and, thereby, preventing rates of hospitalization that could overwhelm resources. Subsequently, the national lockdown was extended until May 10, 2020. The virus began to spread again in France (and more generally in Europe) in the autumn of 2020, prompting the government to declare a second national lockdown from October 30 to December 10. At the end of December, France began a massive campaign of vaccination. But another surge in infection forced the French government to declare a third national lockdown from April 3 to May 3, 2021.

The population of Chinese origin in France first became aware of the danger of the Covid-19 virus in January 2020 and anticipated that it would spread to Europe in general and France in particular, though their attempts to bring that to the attention of the proper authorities were largely dismissed. Health workers and medical and biological researchers of Chinese origin who live in France started to alert their colleagues and patients about the virus as well as to translate the first scientific findings on Covid-19 from Chinese into French. At the same time, because they had heard that the health-care system and the hospitals in the Hubei region were under pressure due to shortages of medical equipment, the researchers started to appeal to the Chinese community in France for help in shipping medical supplies to their colleagues in China.

The Chinese community, mainly first-generation migrants, started to take preventive measures against infection with the virus. These measures went

from wearing masks and avoiding public transportation to quarantining at home. In France, the EpiCov study shows that during the first wave of the pandemic (in May 2020), immigrant background participants ( $n = 111\ 824$ , including first-generation migrants and descendants, all origin countries combined) from non-European countries were more exposed to Covid-19-related factors and more respectful of prevention: whereas 61.8% of the majority population reported not wearing a face mask systematically when outside, the proportion was lowest among first-generation Asian migrants (only 23.5%,  $P < 0.001$ ), and the proportion among descendants of Asian migrants was 42.6% (Gosselin et al, 2022). At the same time, the spread of the virus on a global scale was accompanied by a process of racialization of the disease (Reny & Barreto, 2020). In the first months of the pandemic, in some political and media discourses, the virus was strongly associated with China and Chinese people. This led to an increase in the stigmatization of people perceived as “Chinese” (more broadly as “Asian”) worldwide and to a surge in discrimination and anti-Asian racism, which reached a height between February and May 2020 (Adja et al., 2020; França et al., 2022; He et al., 2020; Pang, 2021). In France, the pandemic triggered incidents of discrimination, racism, and xenophobia, violent and explicit to varying degrees, against Chinese as well as Asians in general, ranging from mistrust and avoidance to physical attacks and stigmatization in public places (Wang et al., 2021). The hardening of racist attitudes and the publicizing of these discriminatory incidents (via social networks and activist associations) catalyzed increased awareness of anti-Asian racism and the need to combat it, in particular by the descendants and highly educated first-generation migrants (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021a; Wang et al., 2022). These statements remind us of the stigmatization of ethnic minorities in other epidemics throughout history. For example, association of smallpox with Chinatown intensified over the course of four successive outbreaks in nineteenth-century San Francisco (Craddock, 1995). Another example is the stigma suffered by Canadians of Chinese and Asian ethnicity in general during the SARS outbreak in 2002 (Ali, 2008). In addition, xenophobia increased in the US during the Ebola epidemic in 2014 (Kim et al., 2016).

In the spring of 2020, when the health conditions deteriorated in France, and it began to suffer shortages of medical equipment, health-care workers and ordinary people of Chinese origin asked for and received medical supplies from China. By doing so, they also became involved in donations to French medical institutions, organizations, and individuals. During the first national lockdown in France, many groups of Chinese people organized self-protection and mutual assistance to control the spread of the virus at the neighborhood level as well as helping other Chinese living in precarious conditions, offering supplies of food and medical equipment.

Gradually, the health crisis took hold for the long term, and national and international leaders started to take measures in order to “live with the virus.” The long course of the pandemic (over two years) triggered profound social, political, and economic changes, affecting the lives of billions of people. The living conditions and social trajectories of Chinese people in France have also been shaped by this global crisis.

This book analyzes the experiences of Chinese migrants and their descendants who lived in France during the Covid-19 pandemic, in terms of their everyday habits and daily lives: media consumption, preventive measures, stress and anxiety, food behaviors, community security (in Section 1), with studies focused on various specific subgroups: elderly, international students, entrepreneurs, and people in precarious conditions (Section 2), looking at their changing struggles for citizenship, solidarity and anti-racist mobilization, and relationship to their living and home countries (Section 3). Before we lay out the research methodology and describe the twelve chapters in this volume, we first discuss the huge divergence in the representation of Covid-19 and crisis management in China and France, in other words, in the home and living countries of the Chinese migrants studied here. This divergence makes the experiences of Chinese people in France unique and relevant for shedding light on individual agency (among migrants or descendants of migrants) in dealing with a global crisis. We also address how the pandemic reshaped transnational mobility and diasporic connections and how migrants and diasporas have reacted to the pandemic and contributed to handling its effects.

## 1 The Chinese Population in France: History of Migration Waves

The first wave in modern times dates to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Chinese workers mainly from northeast China and Shandong Province were recruited to work during World War I (Ma, 2012). In the 1930s, emigration from Zhejiang Province to Europe began. People from Wenzhou and Qingtian tend to go into a few particular professions: Chinese trinket shops, peddling miscellaneous goods, giving pedicures, catering, and leather work (Live, 1992). After 1949, with the founding of the People’s Republic of China, this immigration flow slowed but then resumed in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Most Chinese newcomers in France in 1980s and 1990s were from Zhejiang Province (Poisson, 2005; Ma Mung, 2000).

<sup>1</sup> The opening up and reforms in China started in 1978.

A second wave started in 1975 after nationalist movements and urban riots broke out in the area of the former Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam). Available data show a rapid increase in the flow of refugees over the period between late 1970s and early 1980s (20,000 Asians in 1975; 104,000 in 1982). Many of these refugees obtained French citizenship and identified themselves as having “Chinese origins.” Some of them are descendants of Chinese who had earlier migrated to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand from Guangdong and Fujian Provinces.

The third wave began at the end of the 1990s, with migration from the urban areas of northeast China. After the reform and opening up policies were implemented, this region, known for heavy industry, underwent great social and institutional disruption. State-owned enterprises went bankrupt and were privatized, with a large number of their employees dismissed. Many of them fell into economically difficult conditions and decided to leave the country to seek a better life elsewhere (Cattelain et al., 2005).

A fourth wave began in 2000, in which skilled young Chinese went to France to pursue higher education and then settled there after graduation. In terms of immigration status, they become skilled migrants, with the residency cards issued for various reasons: salaried jobs, business, scientific work, marriage, and starting a family life. Some of them decided to adopt French citizenship.

The Chinese population in Paris is not a monolith, as it has wide variation in terms of the region of origin, migratory wave, gender distribution, and socio-economic status due to these different waves of immigration and demographic characteristics (Wang, 2021).

## 2 Differences in the Social Construction of the Covid-19 Pandemic between China and France

To understanding the gap between China and France in terms of managing the Covid-19 crisis, we need to analyze the social construction of the pandemic in different social contexts, in other words, the processes through which political, medical, media, and other social actors construct a collective representation of Covid-19, its severity, and the measures needed to counter it, in a particular social and historical context. The perception of a health threat is almost systemically influenced by media, political, and institutional communication, which tends to amplify or mitigate its main features, characteristics, and consequences (Pidgeon et al., 2003). In addition, interpersonal exchanges play a key role in the process of perceiving a threat and in the construction of social representations (Garrett, 2011). Scholars in different countries examined the

social construction of the Covid-19 pandemic. In Canada, different stages of the evolution of the pandemic can be defined based on the media discourse among experts, who at different times defined various aspects of Covid-19 for the public, and political authorities have defined as a social problem (Negura et al., 2021). In Germany, during the initial weeks of the worldwide Covid-19 outbreak between January and March 2020 and shortly before the first German lockdown, individual and collective actors had different perceptions of the seriousness of the Covid-19 threat that began to be reiterated in the public discourse (Deisner et al., 2021).

The different social representations of Covid-19 in China and France are rooted in their experience with infectious diseases. France has experienced few major epidemics over the past century: the so-called Spanish flu in 1918, the “Asian flu” in 1957–1958 linked to the influenza A (H<sub>2</sub>N<sub>2</sub>) virus, the “Hong Kong flu” due to the influenza A (H<sub>3</sub>N<sub>2</sub>) virus in 1968–1969 (Maurel, 2020); and AIDS in 1983. Epidemics of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), swine flu (novel influenza A, or H<sub>1</sub>N<sub>1</sub>), Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV), and Ebola in the twenty-first century had little impact on France.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the case in China, which was hard hit by various epidemics in the twentieth and twenty-first century, among which are the following infectious diseases. Between 1772 and 1949, Yunnan Province suffered 200 epidemics of various types of plague, which caused one million deaths. Only after massive mass prevention and treatment was the plague declared completely controlled in China in 1964. Cholera was introduced in Yunnan from India in 1921, with outbreaks in 1939 and 1942, before it was completely controlled in 1957. Another example is smallpox, which was prevalent in China before 1949 and was eradicated in 1960, when the last case emerged in Yunnan Province. In the early 1950s, schistosomiasis was endemic in as many as twelve provinces, threatening a population of more than 100 million people, of which 12 million were infected with the disease, and many workers lost their lives. The epidemic was brought under control, but still not eliminated. Tuberculosis, which had relatively high rates of morbidity and mortality in both urban and rural areas in China, declined steadily and has been largely controlled since 1949. At present, 4.5 million people in China are infected, but treatment is now fairly effective.<sup>3</sup>

2 For a history of epidemics in the twentieth century, see [https://www.bnf.fr/sites/default/files/2020-04/Bibliographie\\_Epidemies\\_depuis\\_1900.pdf](https://www.bnf.fr/sites/default/files/2020-04/Bibliographie_Epidemies_depuis_1900.pdf).

3 We thank Professor Jing Jun for his generous comments on this paper and information on the history of epidemics in China during our informal discussions. For more information, see, e.g., Leung (2009) on the story of leprosy in China, Feng (2010), and Jing and He (2020).



After the China's reform and opening (post-1978), Shanghai experienced an outbreak of hepatitis A in 1988, affecting over 300,000 people. One of the big problems exposed by this crisis was that commercial interests had been prioritized over people's right to health: in one serious incident, a certain kind of shellfish (*scapharca subcrenata*) was very popular with people living around Shanghai, and vendors in Shandong Province and Tianjin, through a long-standing supply chain, delivered several tons of contaminated shellfish. The health department had found as early as 1982 that the consumption of this kind of shellfish caused gastrointestinal disease, but this did not lead to any response. In addition, several hundred cases of hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) are reported annually in China. It emerged in Shanghai in 1981, as the first reported epidemic, and since then it has appeared in many cities. From 2009 to 2019, Guangzhou had 119 outbreaks, 106 of which were at kindergartens, and 99.3 percent were among children at day-care centers under the age of five. Other examples are an outbreak of SARS in 2003 and an AIDS cluster at the end of the 1990s among farmers in Henan, who were selling their blood as part of an illegal practice of transfusing plasma back into red blood cells.

After the AIDS epidemic, the Chinese government reinforced its disease control and prevention capacity (Huang, 2014). The spread of the SARS virus across China revealed at least three flaws in the public health system: the weakness of the community health-care system, the absence of a strict system of referral based on a patient's history and diagnosis, and the absence of measures to prevent infections at health-care institutions. Since then, although China has been strengthening its community medical service system and emergency management (Lim, 2021), addressing the weakness in community medicine has been difficult. This weakness exists not only in terms of inadequate resources, incomplete infrastructure, and inadequate drug supply but also in terms of its low status compared to the growing hospital-based health care, in addition to poor medical technology, lack of service capacity, and lack of public trust. In general, the problem of poor information on the pandemic is a common denominator of all the public health incidents mentioned above. Data on the prevalence of AIDS is an example.

After the outbreaks of Hepatitis A, HFMD, SARS, and HIV, the Chinese government paid much more attention to infectious disease. Not long after the emergence of Covid-19, in January–February 2020, the Chinese government invested in vaccine research.<sup>4</sup> It predicted in March 2020 that the pandemic had the potential to become global and long-lasting: an initiative to “build

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4 [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-04/14/content\\_5502177.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-04/14/content_5502177.htm).

a human health community” was proposed to fight for global justice, global health, common interests, and common action. Because the health-care system in Wuhan was paralyzed at the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese government described Covid-19 in the media as a highly dangerous disease and imposed strict public health policies to control it.

### 2.1 *The Covid-19 Pandemic as Highly Risky: Chinese Authorities’ Politics, Social Media, and Perception among Citizens*

The SARS epidemic, which occurred in the early 2000s, combined with the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic to put a new issue on the Chinese agenda regarding population control in terms of health and reproductive rights (Greenhalgh, 2009). Health authorities in China and in neighboring countries started to adopt preventive measures to anticipate potential respiratory epidemics, such as the surveillance of migratory birds, as described by Keck (2020).

When coronavirus emerged, the Chinese population and the Chinese political and medical authorities were already aware of the real danger of an epidemic and of the measures needed to counter it. Based on their experience in the SARS epidemic, Chinese political and medical authorities reacted quickly, mobilizing an enormous amount of material and human resources, such as holding simulations of epidemics at hospitals with patients treated in special rooms dedicated to respiratory diseases and constructing military field hospitals. Also, by designing and presenting a solid and coherent representation of the danger of the disease and of the measures needed to counter it, Chinese authorities employed a nationalist rhetoric aimed at proving the superiority of the Chinese political system, creating the “politics of care” (Sier, 2021) in the name of protecting Chinese citizens from the virus.

Willy Sier examines the visibility of antiviral measures undertaken by Chinese authorities in Wuhan. Sier states that most of the visible signs of the virus were in the form of measures to prevent its spread and believes that the visibility of these measures was a form of government communication to demonstrate the Chinese state’s care and capability. The main tool used in this communication campaign was the visible implementation of high-tech measures to contain the virus, such as technology to detect infections by scanning people’s temperature and tracking people’s movements to enable a targeted response in the case of a local outbreak. This communication campaign blanketed the urban landscape of Wuhan and transformed the crisis into a unique opportunity to prove the superiority of the Chinese political system on the global stage, to deflect responsibility for the outbreak, and to evoke nationalist sentiment.

In responding to the spread of the Covid-19 virus, Chinese authorities employed multiple tools at different levels, broadcasting the presence of the state and its care politics as well as its willingness and ability to protect Chinese citizens. Among these tools were residential committee workers. As Yang et al. (2021) pointed out, the residential committees are self-organized entities that are nominally independent of the government but, in practice, funded and supervised by the government to perform various government-assigned tasks. During the pandemic, residential committee workers were called on to impose the prevention measures established by the Chinese government at the local level: first, by providing infection control and support services for residents and, second, through surveillance of residents' movements for the purpose of contact tracing. These tasks included the construction of additional fencing around an apartment building and controlling exits and entrances, asking inhabitants to show the results of their Covid test; tracking pandemic-related health information in the housing development (including the number of people with confirmed and suspected infections and of those quarantined in each building); collecting, registering, checking, and reporting personal information on all residents (detailed address, telephone number, identity card number, age, sex, temperature, recent travel history) in order to track the cases and trace close contacts (mainly their family members); and providing residents with essential supplies, such as food, groceries, and medicine (Yang et al., 2021). Under the conditions of strict lockdown, residents were completely dependent on residents committee workers for their day-to-day needs. Miao, Schwarz, and Schwarz (2021) show the crucial role of community volunteers and their effective deployment by Chinese authorities during the Covid-19 crisis in order to protect public health and to support overwhelmed public services. They demonstrate that the massive mobilization of hundreds of thousands of volunteers in community-based groups helped to fill gaps in public services.

Some studies also highlight the role played by social media, in particular WeChat, in portraying the disease in a way that is consistent with the messaging, protective measures, and the communication campaign by the Chinese government. De Kloet, Lin, and Hu (2021) describe the reposting of personal stories on WeChat public accounts and the orchestration of these individual stories as part of nation-state maintenance by commercialized accounts. They also identify an evolution in the emotions evoked in these stories, from fear and anxiety, to solidarity and resilience, and, finally, criticism of Western countries, feelings of vindication, and pride. De Kloet et al. also state that the massive dissemination of these stories on social media fed the surge of biopolitical

nationalism and, subsequently, vaccine nationalism. In the same way, Litzinger and Ni (2021) examine the creating and circulation of vlogs on the Chinese platform Douyin during the Wuhan lockdown. These vlogs were produced at mobile hospitals constructed between February and March 2020 as part of the state's isolation and quarantine efforts. They describe these vlogs as bursting with energy and optimism but also appropriated by the Chinese state, which used them to promote a collective commitment to containing the virus.

In China, government communications and the official media and social media portray the virus as extremely dangerous. This image of the disease as extremely dangerous and of the protective measures needed to counter the virus in a collective mission resulted in heavy stigmatization of those in China who were infected with Covid-19, regardless of their nationality and regional origin. The social stigma due to disease, especially mental illness and infectious diseases (i.e., HIV/AIDS), in contemporary China is well documented by researchers. Taking a structural perspective, Jing Jun, an anthropologist, uses the notion of "Titanic's law" to show the link between individual vulnerability to AIDS and social stratification. According to this concept, those who are lower on the social ladder have higher vulnerability. Stigma is therefore the result of structural inequality and discrimination (Jing, 2006).

From a sociocultural perspective, Arthur Kleinman (1986) explores the cultural content of stigma related to mental illness and infectious disease in modern China and, with David Mechanic (1981), looks at the stigmatization of mental illness in China based on observations of psychiatric and medical facilities there in the 1970s. The mechanisms for producing and maintaining stigma are found in the moral universe of the individual (Kleinman et al., 2011). In this sense, the stigma reflects the cultural definition of a "person" in China (Kleinman, 1981) and is produced and maintained by the combined forces of government policies, institutions, and everyday morality.

Those who are infected are judged for their actions that are believed to have led to their infection, as well as endangering their families and communities by bringing illness into common spaces. Not only is the individual stigmatized but so is his or her family—the entire social circle. In the Chinese context, stigmatization is characterized by self-shaming and loss of face, the breaking of social ties, and the social death of the individual and his or her family. This analysis, developed to understand the stigma of mental illness, AIDS, and other infectious diseases, such as the SARS (Lee et al., 2005), is relevant to understanding what has happened with Covid-19. In China, people infected with Covid-19 and their families have experienced multiple forms of discrimination, exclusion, and otherization.

Several sociologists have tried to discern what is unique in the stigmatization surrounding Covid-19. First, the definition of the boundaries between

“them” and “us” is constantly shifting during the pandemic: people from “Wuhan,” from “Hubei,” from other regions affected by the pandemic and travelers returning to China are all stigmatized at different moments in relation to the evolution in the spread of the virus (Wang, 2020). Second, it is necessary to consider the mechanisms of stigmatization in the context of the “risk to society.” Stigma can arise from the sudden appearance of an unpredictable risk. It spreads rapidly as the risk spreads, unlike stigmas that evolve in a more stable context. The stigma attached to people from Hubei is not related to their external and visible characteristics but to hidden characteristics, such as geographic origin, travel history, occupation, and so forth, forming an insidious stigma. Finally, stigma not only is imposed unilaterally by others but also is accompanied by self-labeling (Thoits, 1985). In the first stage of the pandemic, the habitants of Wuhan internalized the social stigma related to Covid-19. This complex stigmatization, as shown throughout the chapters in this book, strongly affected the experiences of Chinese people living in France.

## 2.2 *The French Health System, Already in Crisis, Is Shaken Again and Weakened by the Unprecedented Pandemic*

As said above and related to the history of infectious diseases in France, the French political and health authorities had never had to deal with a health crisis of this magnitude. French policy makers and the population were not familiar with implementation of the measures needed to limit the spread of such a pandemic. In the early 2020, although health protocols were established in France, the potential for being hit by a pandemic was perceived as remote, particularly because the various epidemics in 1990s and 2000s had a marginal impact on daily life for the French people. For example, in 2009 France prepared for the anticipated H1N1 pandemic it in part by purchasing a billion surgical masks and 700 million FFP2 masks (similar to N95 respirators in the US), but in the end it was less severe than expected. The cost to the state was estimated at 700 million–760 million euros, according to the French National Audit Office (Cour des Comptes) in 2011.<sup>5</sup> The French government was heavily criticized at the time for being “too prepared.”

Officially, the first case of Covid-19 infection was detected in France on January 24, 2020. The political leaders made reassuring statements indicating that the French health-care system was prepared to keep the virus from spreading. In the media, researchers, journalists, opinion leaders, and political commentators expressed various, contradictory opinions about the danger of the virus. For example, on February 17, 2020, in a video posted on the website of

5 <https://www.publicsenat.fr/article/parlementaire/grippe-h1n1-quand-la-france-s-etait-trop-preparee-a-une-pandemie-183984/>.

the hospital-university institute in Marseille, titled “Coronavirus, Fewer Deaths Than from Scooter Accidents,” Dr. Didier Raoult, an infectious disease specialist, announced that

The epidemic is located in China and not even in China, it is located in Hubei, ... infectious diseases are always ecosystem diseases, and there are very few infectious diseases that spread to all areas of the earth at the same time, there is no such thing ... probably fewer people died from the new coronavirus in this area of China than from influenza at the same time, ... so it's a lot of noise for not much ... paradoxically the smartest thing that was said was said by Trump, who said, “Look, this is going to go away in the spring because it's true that most seasonal respiratory infections stop in the spring [2020].”<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Raoult, and other doctors making similar statements, got a lot of air time in the media and had a strong impact on the public debate over the management of the pandemic in France. At the same time, other scientists were warning about the severity of the health conditions and the dangers ahead. These scientific controversies about Covid-19 have been studied by French social scientists, using a more or less multidisciplinary approach (Dubois et al., 2021; Hirsch, 2020; Linhardt, 2020). Faced with progressive deterioration in the conditions, the government put the entire population on lockdown on March 16, 2020. This unprecedented decision came as a shock and led to a slowdown in economic activity.

As Bergeron et al. (2020) state, because of the uncertainty due to the health crisis, the government created new ad hoc institutions, even when other organizations, regulations, and protocols already existed to respond to this kind of situation. According to Bergeron et al., this reaction highlighted the lack of preparedness by the French leadership and, at the same time, increased the difficulty of coordinating organizations with overlapping roles. In their book, they first analyze the historical and organizational conditions that prevailed during the emergence of new institutions to manage the coronavirus epidemic and their consequences for the coordination of institutional reactions. They show that, after cyclones (called Lothar and Martin) in 1999 and a severe heat wave in 2003, the French government put in place institutions and tools designed to prepare the country dealing with a major crisis. This preparedness

6 <https://www.mediterranee-infection.com/coronavirus-moins-de-morts-que-par-accident-de-trottinette/>.

generated confidence in the health-care system, so the risk of a viral pandemic in France appeared low.

The Operational Center for Regulation and Response to Health and Social Emergencies (Corruss) became involved in the prevention and response to the coronavirus outbreak as early as January 2, 2020. However, a delay occurred in triggering the pandemic protocols and the interministerial crisis unit (CIC).<sup>7</sup> According to the Commission of Inquiry Report “Public Health: Making a New Start, Lessons from the Covid-19 Epidemic,”<sup>8</sup> the threat of a pandemic was not taken seriously enough. The health officials misread the warning signals, probably due to their desire to avoid “overreacting” to a risk that could turn out to be low, as happened earlier. Overwhelmed by the scale and speed of Covid-19, the government reacted by transforming the institutional environment that had been organized to face a major health crisis. The Scientific Council was created on March 10, 2020, and the national lockdown was announced six days later, in a political environment with high economic and electoral stakes. The health officials seem to have overlooked the existing influenza pandemic plan, even though it provided all the measures needed to deal with such a crisis. The French government created new crisis management organizations, such as the Scientific Council and the Committee for Analysis, Research, and Expertise, in addition to the existing structures and measures. These institutions constituted the “new” frameworks for public actions, which often acted in contradiction to the existing institutions. Finally, Bergeron, Borraz, Castel, and Dedieu (2020) emphasize that the difficulties in coordinating different institutions produced an environment of chaos that limited the response of institutions to the pandemic.

Later, Gaudillière, Izambert, and Juven (2021) argue that the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the French health-care system and revealed the number and diversity of prioritization practices employed to deal with staff and equipment shortages. Indeed, health practitioners working on the front line have testified to the stresses on the overloaded French health system and the shortage of masks (Pialoux, 2020; Piarroux, 2020). Through an analysis of patient triage for treatment and of the equipment and tools employed by hospitals,

7 For memory, the CIC is activated by decision of the Prime Minister. It corresponds to the occurrence of a major crisis, capable of affecting various sectors or areas of society and therefore various ministerial departments, as recalled in Circular No. 6095/SG of July 1, 2019 on the government organization for the management of major crises. Indeed, according to this circular, the main criterion justifying its activation is the transition from a “sectoral crisis” to a “major crisis.”

8 Santé publique: pour un nouveau départ: Leçons de l'épidémie de covid-19, <http://www.senat.fr/rap/r20-199-1/r20-199-13.html>.

Gaudillière et al. (2021) reveal the limits of the French health-care system in its response to the health crisis and the changes in medical practices during the crisis. In particular, they note that, at the height of the emergency, French medical authorities turned to protocols and epidemic models implemented in England, but for the most part they did not take into account the protocols implemented in countries with current know-how about the management of epidemics and viral transmission, in particular those in Asia and West Africa.

Studying recent experience in those countries would have recommended rapid responses, such as universal masking and the establishment of a system of community medicine. Gaudillière et al. (2021) mention the “community medicine” set up in Guinea during the Ebola epidemic, which made it possible to carry out contact tracing and to reconstruct chains of infection. When Covid-19 spread to West Africa, community medicine was reactivated, making it possible to limit its impact. The French health-care system was not prepared to deal with a pandemic and was unable (or only partially and belatedly able) to put in place the responses adopted in Asian and West African countries, such as mask wearing and the deployment of a health-care system at the community level (Fernández, 2020), which could have limited the spread of the virus. The gap between France and China in the implementation of these two measures is particularly wide: in China, the wearing of masks was compulsory and adopted very quickly, and residential committees were mobilized to set up a community health system.

In summary, reactions to the Covid-19 in France were later, less organized, and more chaotic than in China. The political and health officials underestimated the dangers and, before the national lockdown, failed to employ effective measures to limit the spread of the virus in a coherent manner. At the same time, the many voices in the French public debate led to very varied representations of the danger of the virus. Indeed, at the beginning of the pandemic, few called for stronger measures. Instead, the critical voices called for loosening the preventive measures, with demonstrations every Saturday echoing the messages of the yellow vests (*gilets jaunes*) (Noûs, 2020; Poupin, 2020).

Ultimately, these historical, social, and political differences between France and China led to profoundly different social representations of and reactions to Covid-19, which contributed to differential social constructions of the pandemic. We study the experiences of Chinese living in France within this general framework of a gap between the country of origin and the living country in dealing with Covid-19. The chapters in this book demonstrate that the differential positioning of our respondents in one of these two material and symbolic contexts (or in between them) profoundly affected their representation of the pandemic and influenced their practices on a daily basis.



### 3 Chinese Diaspora in France at the Time of the Pandemic

#### 3.1 *Daily Experiences in Stigmatization and Solidarity*

This volume is the fruit of a project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) from April 2020 to March 2022, called Chinese Migration in France Facing the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Emergence of New Forms of Solidarity in Times of Crisis (abbreviated as MigraChiCovid). The MigraChiCovid project consisted of a nine-member team: sociologists, journalists, a public health and infectious disease practitioner, and an independent filmmaker. The project studied the social representations, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of Chinese people in France related to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

The Chinese population in France was affected by the outbreak of Covid-19 very early, before the French-majority population, and reacted in multiple ways. On the one hand, some Chinese migrants and French-born Chinese—among them medical experts, journalists, leaders of organizations, and researchers—were actively involved in the organization of care, the supply of medical equipment, and information sharing and the dissemination of expert knowledge beginning in January 2020. On the other hand, some people experienced discrimination and anti-Asian racism related to Covid-19. This project was designed to explore the tensions between these two coexisting realities: first, the local, national, and transnational solidarity dynamics to control the spread of Covid-19 and to protect themselves and others, to which the Chinese living in France contributed; and, second, the discrimination, racism, stigmatization against, and exclusion of Chinese people and their struggle to address these social injustices.

What we observed in France mirrors the results in studies on other Chinese diasporas. In Italy, the mayor of Prato said that because of their anticipated self-quarantine, the Chinese people became “a model for dealing with the pandemic” (Ceccagno & Salvati, 2020). Thanks to ethnic Chinese networks in various countries, masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) were

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9 Three main research themes were designed the process of conceptualizing the project: first, an analysis of professional practices by health practitioners and medical researchers of Chinese origin in France during the pandemic within and outside the French health-care system; second, an analysis of the experiences of discrimination and anti-Asian racism related to the pandemic among Chinese migrants and their children and mobilization against them; third, an analysis of changes in the relationship between China and Chinese migrants or their descendants, on the one hand, and of their transnational civic responsibility in battling the virus, on the other. Some chapters in this book are related to one of these three research themes, and others are linked to several themes at the same time or even go beyond these three main themes.

gathered, donated, and distributed transnationally, beginning in January–March 2020 from other parts of world to China and later from China to Chinese diasporas. Witnessing this unprecedented mobilization of the Chinese diaspora in reaction to the pandemic, some scholars have analyzed the intertwined nature of top-down and bottom-up mobilization of the diaspora by the Chinese Party-state (Ceccagno & Thunø, 2022). They write that, thanks to the extensive use of Chinese social media, mostly WeChat, China's diaspora politics showed a new and strong capacity for extraterritorial governance, aimed at expanding transnational nation-building. Indeed, the inability of millions of Chinese who were outside the country to travel because of the cancellation of international trips during the pandemic enabled local institutional actors (embassies, associations, etc.) in the Chinese diaspora to centralize diasporic resources (material and symbolic) that are usually held at the individual level. During the pandemic, overseas Chinese associations have played an even more central role than usual to link the “two worlds” (Li, 1999): home and host countries.

By using WeChat, Chinese diasporas around the world can be connected to China and form a virtual Chinese community (Sun & Yu, 2022). As shown in the chapters in this book, in France, WeChat plays a crucial role not only in the everyday life of Chinese people but also in the various kinds of mobilization during the health crisis: it has been used for circulating important diasporic politics and news within local communities, coordinating collective activities and encouraging participation in them, and registering personal information to enable people to obtain PPE. The Chinese population in France is navigating between the living society and their imagined motherland through locally embedded digital technologies and ethnic media. Our study also demonstrates the extremely complex interactions between the Chinese population outside China, the living country (authorities as well as ordinary citizens in various professions), and their home country. Based on the Chinese diaspora in France, we show the reconfiguration of multiple power relationships during the pandemic and the socially differentiated ways in which the respondents to our survey, based on their social profiles, formed various kinds of community—with the Chinese state, with Chinese people in China, with other Chinese living in France, with French people in general, with local French institutions, and so on—as they dealt with Covid-19.

Another theme that arose in our research is the social injustice (stigmatization, discrimination, and racism) visited on the Chinese people in France, because of the racialization of the virus (Reny & Barreto, 2020), which consisted of describing the virus as related to a country (China) and to the “Chinese” population. The racialization of the disease was accompanied by the awakening of long-standing stigmas rooted in colonial and postcolonial history, such as viewing the Chinese population as “dirty,” “vicious” (Chan & Montt Strabucchi,

2021; Li & Nicholson, 2021), and eternally alien. Indeed, the racism, discrimination, and racial microaggressions targeted at Chinese and, more broadly, Asian-looking populations increased around world during the pandemic, and they adopted different strategies to deal with racism (França et al., 2022; Jun & Zhang, 2022; Ma & Zhan, 2020; Roberto et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Our study illustrates three characteristics that emerge in French research on anti-Asian racism. First, the Covid-19 pandemic was a catalyst that made this racism more visible and raised major awareness among the Chinese overseas (Wang et al., 2021). Second, the Chinese population holds different positions and had different levels of consciousness about this anti-Asian racism. For example, although many of the descendants were already well aware of it before Covid-19 and previously dealt with it by organizing collective action, such as demonstrations in 2016 and 2017 (Wang, 2022), skilled migrants who arrived in France after 2010s were only first awakened to it during the pandemic and reacted to it with unprecedented mobilization against it (Wang et al., 2022). Third, resistance to anti-Asian racism took the form of individual actions by some, such as by speaking out and defending themselves and denouncing injustice by arguing individually with those making racist statements, but others became involved in collective action, together with fellow Chinese or with broader groups. For example, those who had already engaged in anti-racist activism against Asians (usually descendants) saw the rise in attacks as part of racism and discrimination in general, enlarging their perspective to see the struggles against anti-Asian racism in the larger context of similar struggles that affect other minorities in France (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021a).

The final major theme in this research project comprises the everyday experiences and narratives of Chinese people in France. Many entrepreneurs and journalists of Chinese origin in France have published articles in Chinese, recounting their own experiences during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> These publications (Qian, 2020; Wu, 2020) supported measures by ordinary people, showing that they felt a need to express themselves to their fellow Chinese during the crisis, describing how they got news related to the pandemic, how they got food, how their lives had changed during the lockdowns, the preventive measures they were taking, their own mental health issues, their engagement in mutual assistance, and how they maintain a social life (online and offline) through social networks. All these aspects are addressed in the following chapters (in particular, in Section 1). We also found a lot of resonance with the work of other

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Wu (2020) and Qian (2020). See also the description by a Chinese graduate student living in France of the early stages of the pandemic in Wuhan during a trip home (Chen & Thomas, 2020).

scholars, such as Hu and Umeda (2021), whose study explores the stress, anxiety, and depression among Chinese residents in Japan during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 3.2 *Methodology, Data, and Profiles of the Respondents*

This research is based on a mixed approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative methods. First, we conducted semistructured interviews and observed participants, collecting online and offline ethnographies and monitoring various media (from 2020 to 2022, in three languages: Chinese, French, and English); and, second, we analyzed quantitative data collected from an online questionnaire available in two languages (French and Chinese). By crossing and linking quantitative and qualitative data, we made the study deeper and more precise, enabling us to bridge the gaps between the quantitative and qualitative data and to clarify their blind spots. Analysis of the quantitative data enabled us to identify general patterns in the Chinese population in France, patterns that we then tested, confirmed (or not), and explained (at least partially) with qualitative data. At the same time, the qualitative data clarify the reasoning and mechanisms that lead to certain discourses, practices, and actions—in other words, how the Chinese people make sense of and articulate their lived experience.

The qualitative empirical dataset consists of interviews, observations of participants, and online and offline ethnographies that we conducted from June 2020 to March 2022, mainly in the Paris region (Île-de-France) but also in Lyon and Marseille, which are home to the second- and third-largest Chinese communities in France. We carried out a total of 83 individual interviews and 10 group interviews with a total of 106 participants. The interview subjects are all people of Chinese origin living in France, of which sixty are women and forty-six are men, ninety are first-generation migrants, and sixteen are descendants. They are between twenty and eighty-four years old (average age is 38.7). The majority of them are students, managers (*cadres*), and unskilled workers (employees or merchants). They demonstrate the diversity of the Chinese population in France, not only in terms of the duration of their residence and whether they are first- or second-generation migrants, but also in terms of their professional level and economic status as well as their regional origin. Most came from Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong Provinces, Northeast China (Dongbei) or were from Chinese populations in Southeast Asia and French overseas territories. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Chinese (70), with twenty-two in French and one in Cantonese. Throughout the book, we maintain the anonymity of the respondents, except for those who hold public positions and spoke on behalf of their organization or office.

The quantitative empirical dataset comprises 387 responses to a self-administered online questionnaire carried out with snowballing sampling. The questionnaire was available online in both Chinese and French from June to December 2020. Some respondents participated in both interviews and online questionnaires. For our data analysis, we divided the questionnaire respondents into three groups according to their migratory status: nonnaturalized migrants, French naturalized migrants, and descendants of migrants. This grouping enabled us to address the social differentiation within the Chinese diaspora in France in terms of social representation, perceptions, and experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. These three groups are representative of the different migratory paths as well as the heterogeneity of the Chinese diaspora in France. Table 1.1 provides a general description of our sample.

Overall, our sample for the online self-administered questionnaire is mostly female (280 women and 104 men), young (the average age is 30.9 years old), and well educated (54% of the respondents have a master's degree or more). The composition of our sample is strongly related to the way in which our questionnaire was disseminated and administered. The three groups, as defined by their migratory status, have some important differences. In particular, the largest group (209 respondents) is made up of nonnaturalized migrants, followed by the descendants (137 respondents) and naturalized migrants. Moreover, the descendants are the youngest group, with a median age of twenty-three, followed by nonnaturalized migrants, with a median age of thirty. The oldest group consists of the French naturalized migrants (who are in their forties). This is consistent with

TABLE 1.1 Sample description

	Descendants (N = 137)	Nonnaturalized migrants (N = 209)	Naturalized migrants (N = 35)	Overall (N = 381)
Sex				
Females	109 (79.6%)	143 (68.4%)	25 (71.4%)	277 (72.7%)
Males	28 (20.4%)	66 (31.6%)	10 (28.6%)	104 (27.3%)
Age, median (IQR)	23 (20, 27)	30 (25, 39)	42 (37, 48)	27 (23, 37)
Education				
High school or less	51 (37.2%)	34 (16.3%)	8 (22.9%)	93 (24.4%)
Bachelor's degree	30 (21.9%)	48 (23.0%)	5 (14.3%)	83 (21.8%)
Master's degree or higher	56 (40.9%)	127 (60.8%)	22 (62.9%)	205 (53.8)

their migratory path, because obtaining French nationality requires migrants to demonstrate long-term residence and strong roots in France, through marriage to a French citizen, birth of a child in France, and so on.

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show where the respondents to the online questionnaire live in France. Although they live all over the country, and most of the

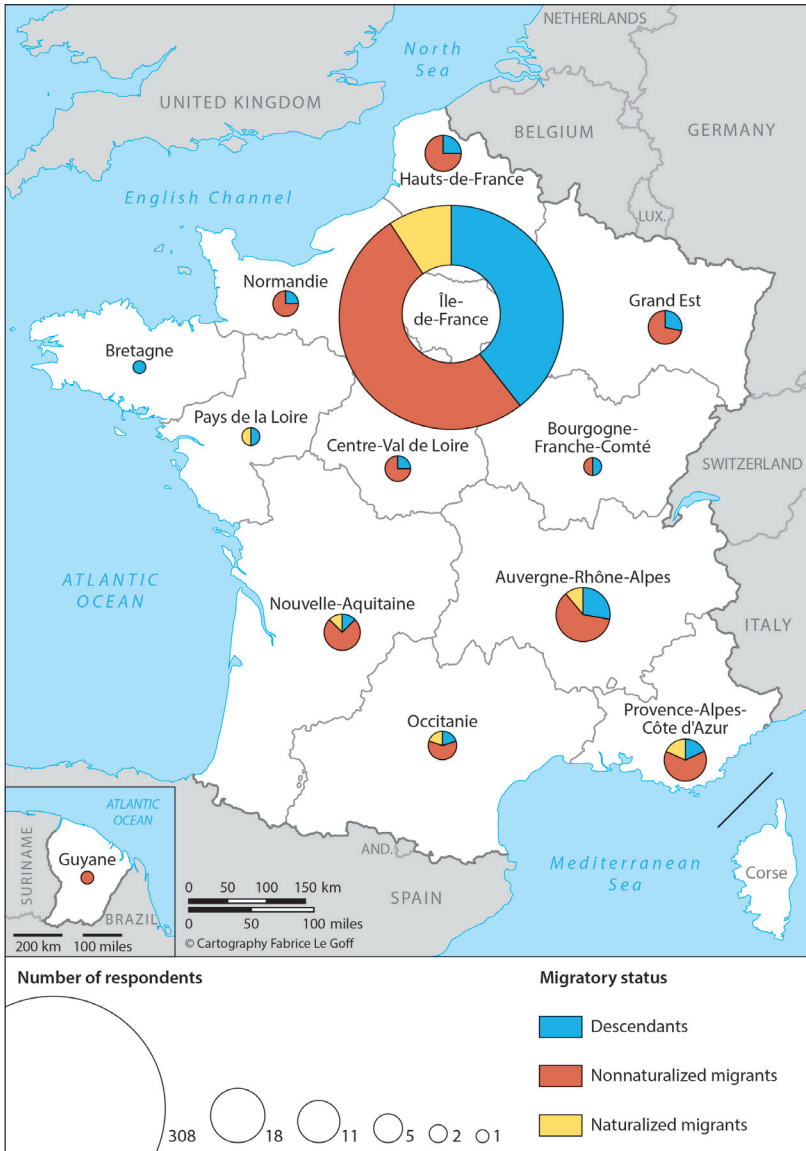


FIGURE 1.1 Map showing residence locations of the respondents to the online questionnaire: France as a whole

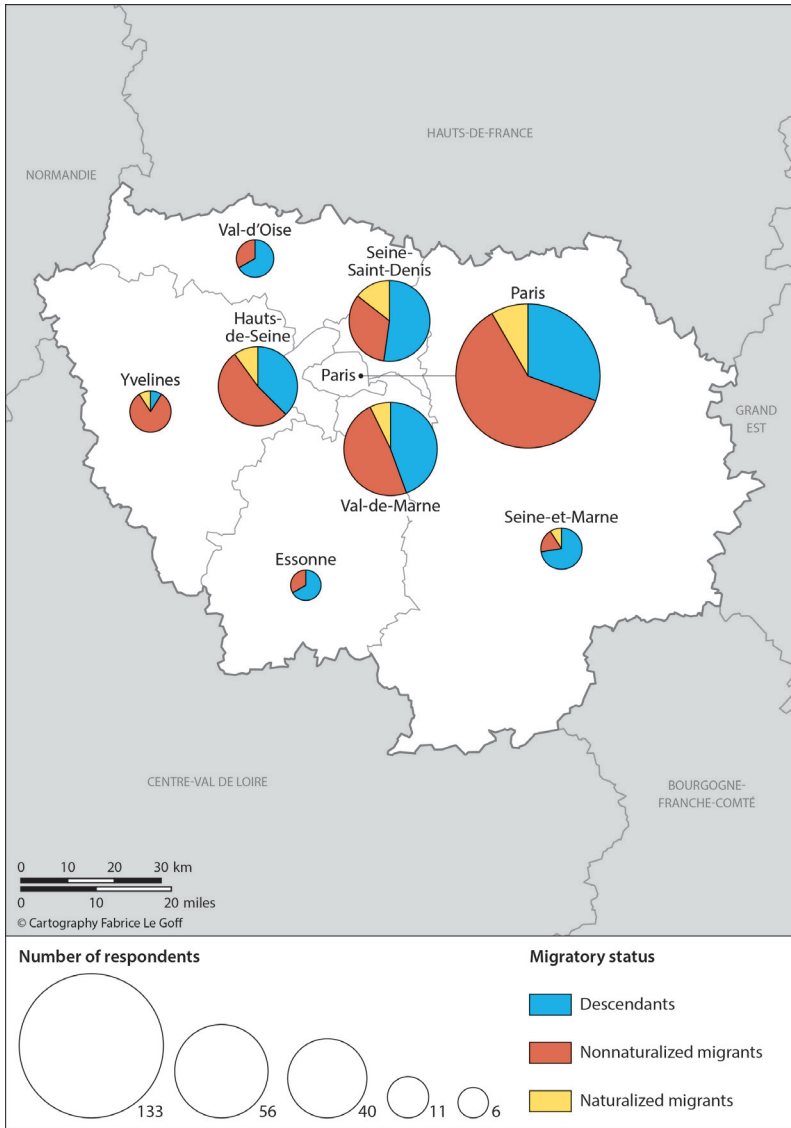


FIGURE 1.2 Map showing residence locations of the respondents to the online questionnaire: Île-de-France region

respondents live in the Île-de-France region: in particular, in Paris and in the surrounding areas, in the departments Seine-Saint-Denis (northeast of Paris), Val-de-Marne (southeast of Paris), and Hauts-de-Seine (west of Paris).

## 4 Organization of the Book

This book is divided into three main sections. Through the twelve chapters grouped in these three sections, we draw the full landscape of experiences by the Chinese in France during Covid-19, with a multiscalar (local, national, and transnational) analysis based not only on the migratory context (home country and living country) but also the duration of the pandemic.

Section 1, “Everyday Practices and Daily Lives during the Pandemic,” deals with various aspects of living conditions for Chinese people in France during the Covid-19 crisis: media consumption, preventive measures, stress and anxiety, food, and keeping the community safe. We show the extent to which they live simultaneously in France and in China and analyze the social differentiation in risk perception among them and the reshaping of everyday activities during the pandemic. We explore several research questions: resocialization through migration and acculturation, transnational dissemination of knowledge and practices, migrants’ in-between position and discrepancy with the living society, risk perception and protection motivation theory, diasporic settlement and the minority-majority dynamic, and so on.

In general, Section 2, “Focus on Specific Chinese Populations in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” analyzes how different subgroups cope with Covid-19: elderly Chinese, Chinese students, migrants living in precarity, and entrepreneurs. Based on these four groups of Chinese in France, we probe research questions related to care and aging, international student (im)mobility, vulnerability in migration and social support within ethnic networks and beyond, and transition in the ethnic business model in the pandemic context.

Then, Section 3, “Citizenship, Mobilization, and Relationship to the Home and Living Countries during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” investigates how the crisis reshapes the state, citizenship, national belonging, and transnational civic responsibilities. We examine the links that the Chinese overseas maintain and renew with both the country of origin and the living country: racial struggles and mobilization, staying healthy, and transnational solidarity.

### 4.1 *Section 1: Everyday Practices and Daily Lives during the Pandemic*

This section consists of five chapters. Chapter 1, “Multilingual Media Consumption by the Chinese Diaspora in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” examines the differences within the Chinese diaspora in France, in terms of access to and consumption of different media sources (French and Chinese television, French and Chinese press, Western and Chinese social networks, etc.) in the Covid-19 era. In particular, we focus on two main aspects of media consumption: media exposure in terms of the variety of media sources to



which individuals have access and the polarization of media consumption between French and Chinese information sources. Subsequently, we examine the effect of polarization of media consumption on media exposure. Because the Chinese population in France is very heterogeneous, we study the divergence in media consumption across different groups defined by their migration trajectory (descendants, nonnaturalized migrants, and naturalized migrants), and the differential impacts of the pandemic on media consumption practices by these three groups in terms of the time spent on obtaining information and satisfaction with information on the pandemic. The descendants tend to have a preference for consuming French sources of information, and first-generation migrants, in particular those with a bachelor's degree or higher, tend to consume a larger variety of media, constantly comparing French and Chinese sources. During the pandemic, they have greatly increased their media consumption and are more satisfied than the descendants with information on Covid-19. We also show the link between media consumption and risk perception: migrants whose media consumption tends toward French information are less likely to use protective measures, because the social representations of Covid-19 in France portray it as not very dangerous. By contrast, the descendants, who also consume information from Chinese sources in addition to many different French sources, have a stronger tendency to use protective measures. Furthermore, they feel the need to put the information from French media sources into perspective with news from Chinese media sources.

Chapter 2, "Out of Step: Preventive Measures among People of Chinese Origin in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic," analyzes how people of Chinese origin have used protective measures during the pandemic and, unlike the general French population, anticipated the need for them. In particular, the first-generation migrants began to anticipate this need in January 2020, wearing masks on public transportation and in public places well before the French-born Chinese. The vast majority of our respondents had overwhelmingly adopted preventive measures by the beginning of March 2020, just before the general lockdown imposed by the French government. The French government started to recommend protective and social distancing measures on in mid-March 2020. People of Chinese origin said that they felt a large gap with the French population in the adoption of preventive measures. First-generation migrants quickly became deeply concerned about the emergence of the pandemic in China. They began to protect themselves early on, following the instructions and advice of Chinese authorities disseminated on official media and social media, particularly WeChat. Descendants became aware of conditions in China from their parents and relatives living in China.

However, they maintained a certain distance, and, in line with the announcements by French authorities, did not believe that the virus posed a major danger in France. Finally, descendants adopted protective practices in a relatively flexible manner, particularly with the goal of protecting and pacifying their parents. Descendants saw themselves as in between and caught in a contradictory position. As Covid-19 conditions in France deteriorated, the attitudes of descendants about the virus began to resemble those of their parents and differ from those of their French relatives, friends, and colleagues. The last section of this chapter focuses on vaccination practices and respondents' perceptions of vaccines as one way to protect themselves.

Chapter 3, "Stress and Anxiety among the Chinese Population in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic: a Study Examining Societal and Individual Factors," investigates the effect of a set of factors triggered by Covid-19 in different time frames on the stress and anxiety felt by the Chinese population in France during the pandemic. In the very first phase of the pandemic, between January and the end of February 2020, migrants had a higher level of stress and anxiety than descendants. All the groups studied from the end of February until mid-March 2020 experienced an increase in anxiety and stress, with a more significant increase among the descendants. A wide gap between the groups is linked to the factors that triggered the stress and anxiety. Among the migrants, the feeling of anxiety is mainly related to the fear of Covid-19 and infection and, to a lesser extent, to experiences with anti-Asian racism. However, among descendants, the feeling of anxiety seems to be mainly related to racist experiences. This gap is largely linked to the different social representations of Covid-19 and the ways in which it was presented by Chinese authorities and media, on the one hand, and French authorities and media, on the other. During the second phase, which we call "normalization of the Covid-19 pandemic" (beginning in June 2020), the effects of fear of the virus and of racist experiences on stress and anxiety seemed to diminish. But new drivers of anxiety emerged and affected the most precarious populations. Isolation, educational difficulty, difficulty in accessing the job market, and economic uncertainty are some personal factors that contributed the most to the decline in our respondents' mental health. These difficulties are reinforced by the fact that the outcome of the pandemic remains uncertain. Anxiety is amplified by the barriers that Chinese authorities erected to prevent people from returning to China, and a few interviewees mentioned stress and anxiety related to collective, political, and social life and more broadly to the future.

Chapter 4, "Between Safety and Health: How the Pandemic Reshaped Food Behaviors among Chinese People in France," studies the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a range of food practices (home cooking and eating out) among

Chinese people in France since 2020. The food behaviors of the Chinese population were reconfigured based on two different but overlapping rationales: avoiding infection with the virus and staying healthy in general. The desire to avoid infection led to changes in the food practices of Chinese people, such as bulk purchases and shopping for food online. Using food as a part of staying healthy is consistent with the principles of Chinese medicine, so among interviewees who were already users of Chinese medicine, this behavior thus represented some continuity. A clear difference emerged between first-generation Chinese migrants and descendants born in France with respect to home cooking and eating out. In general, Chinese migrants were more vigilant about their potential risk of infection at different stages of food preparation and were more capable of following dietary advice from China to support their health. During the pandemic, their ordinary food practices demonstrate the close links between the perception of risk, the representations of health and illness, and media consumption behaviors. This chapter shows that food norms are constantly appropriated and reappropriated by individuals with different social backgrounds. The respondents found various ways to adapt their diet during the pandemic, between continuity and change with their original eating habits. In this sense, this chapter illustrates how two interlaced rationales (preventing infection and staying healthy) are shaped and operate at the individual level. Moreover, the changes in their routines are strongly driven by digital tools, which play an increasing role in the democratization of new knowledge about food during the pandemic and easily connect customers and food providers. From the perspective of the providers, the pandemic led to a profound change in food markets, other than catering and restaurants. This trend was marked by accelerated digitization. Even before the pandemic, takeout meals were already popular in Asia, and some Chinese entrepreneurs in France had started to create online food ordering platforms. In this sense, in France, Chinese restaurateurs might have been more prepared than others in the digital transition of their business.

Finally, Chapter 5, "A Community Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Collective Actions by Chinese Residents of a Multiethnic Neighborhood in a Northern Suburb of Paris," by focusing on Chinese migrants and their descendants in the Village Residence, located in a multiethnic neighborhood north of Paris, examines collective actions (distribution of masks and Chinese medicines, food delivery for people who are infected) by the Chinese residents to respond to the pandemic, marked by many kinds of inequality in terms of access to health care. Previous tensions between Chinese and non-Chinese residents that predated the pandemic (related to the danger of racist attacks on Chinese people and previous struggles against urban violence)

were resurrected and exacerbated by the health crisis. During the pandemic, new security borders were erected around the Chinese population and against non-Chinese populations. The border of protection became ethnically defined and protected the Chinese among themselves. At this housing development, Covid-19 was widely perceived as a disease of the “others.” Chinese residents are both subject to this racialization of the disease and participants in the dynamic by redefining distances and borders with neighbors of non-Chinese origin, in the name of safety and protection from Covid-19. Through this example, we show the two consequences of community safekeeping: on the one hand, in a health emergency, especially early in the pandemic, before medical solutions to the coronavirus were developed, by practicing testing, tracing, and isolation, the community provided its members with vital medical and paramedical resources and support networks; on the other hand, the community spirit led to the exclusion of those who were perceived as foreign and potentially threatening to that community.

#### 4.2 *Section 2: Focus on Specific Chinese Populations in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic*

This section contains four chapters and analyzes how different groups, defined by their social characteristics, have experienced the Covid-19 pandemic. Chapter 6, “Social Ties of Elderly Migrants in Paris during Covid-19: The Chinese in Paris,” focuses on the ways in which elderly Chinese migrants maintain social ties—with their family members, peer groups, the living society, and the country of origin—from January to October 2020 during the pandemic. This chapter is based not only on the empirical data collected as part of the MigraChiCovid project but also the data gathered on the daily activities by a Franco-Chinese association, the Chinese of France, French of China (CFFC) located in the neighborhood of Paris called Belleville. The study highlights the reconfiguration of different types of social ties and interactions between them. Family ties are marked by intergenerational solidarity: mutual assistance and reverse transmission, and, at the same time, they are characterized by a gap between respondents and their descendants in how they understand the disease and perceive risk. Despite the reduction in physical contact and face-to-face social activities, elderly Chinese developed and maintained peer ties through the use of WeChat. Online exchanges with other seniors and volunteers at CFFC helped them to combat isolation and loneliness and to mitigate everyday stress and fear of the disease. As the pandemic progressed, this population, which was already marginalized, distanced itself further from their living society. Indeed, starting in January/February 2020, by engaging in self-lockdown as a protective measure against infection, elderly

Chinese became almost invisible in public during the first French national lockdown from March to May 2020. Meanwhile, those who had come from mainland China, despite the great physical distance and restrictions on international travel, maintained strong ties with their country of origin, in particular through the consumption of official Chinese media and social media. This chapter also provides some reflections on the role of social workers in supporting elderly immigrants in the digital and pandemic era: the use of the smartphone truly supported their capacity to act. Covid-19 has led to the emergence of new channels for delivering care to elderly Chinese, particularly with digital tools.

Chapter 7, “Disruption in Study Abroad during the Pandemic: Chinese Students in France,” examines the disruptive effect of Covid-19 on different aspects of the lives of Chinese students studying in France: their studies, daily life, employment, and migratory trajectories. First, the transition to distance learning during the first phases of the pandemic had contrasting effects on the learning processes of our respondents: negative for some and beneficial for others, depending on the student’s field of study, level of study, and living conditions. The clearest negative effects, however, are seen with respect to their student experience, which was harmed by their inability to explore their geography and to develop social relationships with other students. Second, at a pivotal moment, recent graduates found their careers derailed by the arrival of Covid-19. The duration of this derailment depended on their training and their personal conditions, reflecting the effect of existing inequality. They developed strategies for adapting to the new conditions, which included making some concessions. Third, looking back over time enables us to better understand the ways in which these students constructed migratory paths based on the evolution of the pandemic, by evaluating the risks and prioritizing their objectives. The health considerations that seemed overwhelming at the beginning of the pandemic gradually gave way to other, more general concerns, such as economic security, professional success, and personal independence.

Chapter 8, “Survival during the Pandemic and Coping with Risk: an Ethnography of Vulnerable Chinese Migrants Receiving Food Assistance,” examines how Chinese migrants in precarious conditions living in France cope with multiple physical, mental, social, and economic risks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter is based on an ethnographic study of an ethnically based food assistance system between March and May 2021 set up by entrepreneurs of Chinese origin to help vulnerable Chinese people, mainly undocumented migrants. The chapter shows that migrants living in great precarity have to choose between the risk of potential infection and the need to find the resources for survival. This trade-off was particularly stark,

as they perceive the virus as extremely dangerous but, at the same time, have few resources with which to protect themselves, avoid infection, and seek treatment. We highlight the multiple strategies employed by these migrants to find the resources for daily survival. In this context, the ethnic food assistance system was a key tool in helping them deal with the multiple sources of precarity driven by the pandemic. The entrepreneurs who organized the food distribution and most of the volunteers had originally come from Wenzhou (in Zhejiang) and were wealthy, whereas the beneficiaries were almost all from Northeast China. In the literature, the relationships and the interactions between these two groups in France (wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs versus vulnerable Chinese workers, or migrants from Wenzhou versus those from Northeast China) are often viewed through the lens of labor tensions and exploitation at work. However, our study sheds new light on the relationship between tension and emerging solidarity of these two groups in a crisis. The pandemic may well have had a silver lining for the Chinese communities in France by creating conditions in which these regional and class-oriented boundaries were crossed and reconfigured.

Chapter 9, “Capitalizing on Opportunities during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Business Transitions among Chinese Immigrant Entrepreneurs in France,” explores business transitions among Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in France (in five different commercial sectors: imports and exports, retail, catering, hotels, and tobacco) during the Covid-19 pandemic. After giving a historical overview of the development of ethnic Chinese businesses over the past century, the chapter examines the challenges that these entrepreneurs have faced during the pandemic, the strategies that they adopted in response to these challenges, and what enabled them to shift business patterns and commercial practices under these unprecedented circumstances. Before the pandemic, some Chinese entrepreneurs had already made the transition, in full or in part, to “integrating online and offline businesses,” “hiring beyond Chinese ethnic networks,” and “paying attention to the local policy directions,” which helped them greatly limit the negative impacts of the pandemic. The major findings in this chapter show that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the transition in Chinese immigrant entrepreneurship in France, from offline operations to digital business. However, the pandemic might not be the direct cause of this business transition; rather, it created unique conditions that facilitated the transition. During the pandemic, two unprecedented business opportunities opened up that some Chinese entrepreneurs have proactively pursued since April–May 2020: “fostering local production” and “seeking low-risk sectors.” These might be new trends for Chinese entrepreneurs in France in the future. This chapter suggests that, from a theoretical perspective, business

transitions among Chinese entrepreneurs in France need to be examined beyond the framework of pure economic rationality, taking into consideration the intersection of new dynamics in Chinese migration to a living country and the cross-cultural, cross-institutional and cross-border social engagement of the entrepreneurs before, during, and after the pandemic.

#### 4.3 *Section 3: Citizenship, Mobilization, and Relationship to the Home and Living Countries during the Covid-19 Pandemic*

This section consists of three chapters. Chapter 10, “Anti-Asian Racism in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences, Narratives, and Reactions” studies the anti-Asian racism experienced by people of Chinese origin in France during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this chapter, using quantitative and qualitative data, we first analyze the various types of justifications and expressions of anti-Asian racism—in other words, the experience with and reporting of attacks, discrimination, and stigmatization by different groups in the Chinese population in France. These heterogeneous reports reveal different degrees of awareness of racism and different understandings of “race.” They are organized into various narratives, ranging from the description of personal experiences to the inscription of these personal experiences in the evolution of French society and to the use of social science concepts and political rhetoric. Second, we examine the forms of reaction, at the individual and group levels, by people of Chinese origin in France. The reactions range from distancing and avoidance to immediate personal responses to political engagement. Authors argue that the pandemic plays a role in the awareness raising and the fight against racism among the Chinese population in France. Through a case study, using the natural language processing (NLP) technique, we examine the discursive evolution by the Association of Young Chinese in France (*Association des Jeunes Chinois de France*, AJCF), whose membership mainly consists of descendants of Chinese and Southeast Asian migrants. By analyzing the content of Facebook posts by the AJCF over an eleven-year period (2010–2021), we show how the AJCF’s messaging about anti-Asian racism was designed and spread as well as the changes in how Chinese people in France think and speak about anti-Asian racism.

In confronting social inequality that was exacerbated by the pandemic, Chapter 11, “Caring for Compatriots during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Professional Practices by Health-Care Workers of Chinese Origin in France,” reflects on supporting the health of migrants in the French context, in order to move from an approach focused on a “cure” to one prioritizing “care.” In studying the professional practices of Chinese health workers in France during the health crisis, we distinguish two types of treatment available. The first is what

is observed in the French health-care system. Thanks to the medical professionals of Chinese origin who work in the French health-care system (hospital practitioners, office-based physicians and therapists, etc.), more medical care has been adapted to the needs of the population of Chinese origin. The responses by these medical professionals during an unprecedented health-care crisis revealed the limits of the French health-care system, which does not sufficiently take into account the specific needs of foreign patients, particularly those who are vulnerable based on their language, culture, and socioeconomic status. Second, we examine the Chinese ethnic care networks, which developed on the margins of the French health-care system. For example, e-health monitoring (in Western medicine or Chinese medicine) in Chinese on WeChat was created by the Chinese health professionals living in France and Chinese language webinars were held with the goal of spreading knowledge about Covid-19 among Chinese overseas. The two kinds of treatment were complementary for keeping migrants healthy during Covid-19. At this unprecedented moment in a health crisis, the response to Covid-19 opened up the possibilities for co-constructing intersectoral systems of action (particularly between medical professionals and social welfare actors) and of collaborating between the clinical Western medicine approach and the complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) approach, with regard to creating more equal access to health care, while questioning the long-term feasibility of these changes.

The pandemic forced us to rethink notions such as belonging, citizenship, borders, community, and solidarity, in global and transnational settings. In Chapter 12, "Beyond National and Ethnic Boundaries: Transnational Solidarity during the Covid-19 Pandemic from the case of the Chinese Diaspora in France," authors show that the Chinese diaspora in France was proactive in responding to the pandemic. Their demonstrations of transnational solidarity by sending and donating PPE were accompanied by the spread of ideas and expert knowledge. These actions helped the Chinese population in France, institutions and relatives in China, and the living country to fight against Covid-19 and to mitigate its effects. The demonstrations at the beginning of the pandemic observed in our fieldwork recall the classical definition of transnationalism in migration, which is much more oriented toward the home country. But in the second phase analyzed in this chapter, the solidarity was shown with the living society and was mostly carried out by diasporic elites and leaders. Finally, during the normalization of the pandemic in French society, the demonstrations of transnational solidarity by the Chinese diaspora exceeded ethnic boundaries. Hence the meaning of transnationalism gradual widened to include solidarity and transnational circulation not only between Chinese in China and Chinese in France but also between Chinese in France



and non-Chinese in France. In this way, this study illustrates that demonstrations of solidarity contribute to the renewal of diaspora organizations and strengthening the sense of belonging and the capacity for action by the diaspora (Kuah-Pearce & Davidson, 2008; Ma & Cartier, 2002). From a theoretical perspective, transnational solidarity seems to have been renewed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of this unprecedented global health crisis, the collaboration and community across national borders, ethnicities, and professions accelerated and evolved. These transnational practices performed by the Chinese diaspora in France should not be analyzed exclusively from the perspective of the homeland-oriented approach (nationalism/patriotism) or solely through the lens of the livingcountry-oriented approach (the integration of Chinese people into French society). Rather, it should be studied from the perspective of the responsibility of global citizenship at a time of a worldwide crisis (Ramsari, 2020), which goes beyond health nationalism. Finally, the many actors in Chinese networks and beyond who participated in offering assistance should be acknowledged: Chinese embassy and government representatives abroad, organization leaders and members, community workers, and ordinary Chinese in other countries. All the actions they took show the multiple scales and multiple directions of the activity. The synergy among all these different actors, not to mention the digital infrastructure, enabled the amassing of solidarity at an unprecedented magnitude.

In addition to publishing this book, the MigraChiCovid project includes making its research results widely available to the general public. We put out a call for the contribution of photographs in the spring of 2020, and photographic exhibitions taken between January 2020 and September 2021 by ordinary people as well as researchers were held in October 2020 and February–April 2022 in Île-de-France. The photographs and related narratives demonstrate the variety of experiences among people of Chinese origin in France during the pandemic, bringing together people with different socioeconomic and migratory backgrounds. The photos also cover different phases of the pandemic (from January 2020 to the autumn of 2021) and represent urban areas with the largest concentrations of Chinese communities in France, especially around Paris (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021b).<sup>11</sup>

In addition, with a dual goal of giving people of Chinese origin a voice and offering various views on the Chinese diaspora in France, from both within and without, the MigraChiCovid team also produced “Between Two

11 See the second exhibition, “(Beyond) Borders in the Time of the Coronavirus: Crossed Views on the Chinese Population in France,” available at <https://www.migrations-asiatiques-en-france.cnrs.fr/actualites/285-expo/>.

Worlds: The Chinese Diaspora in France in the Time of Covid-19,” a documentary lasting eighty-four minutes that portrays the lives of people of Chinese origin in France during the Covid-19 pandemic through a series of ethnographic interviews with people of different migratory profiles, ages, genders, professions, and socioeconomic levels. These interviews reveal their experiences with anti-Asian racism, activism, and transnational solidarity, as well as the perspectives of medical and paramedical personnel and Covid-19 patients’ experiences. Released in January 2022, this documentary is freely available in two versions: one with French and Chinese subtitles,<sup>12</sup> and the other in English and Chinese.<sup>13</sup>

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**SECTION 1**

*Everyday Practices and Daily Lives during  
the Pandemic*





# Multilingual Media Consumption by the Chinese People in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic

*Francesco Madrisotti and Simeng Wang*

## Abstract

This chapter examines the differences within the Chinese diaspora in France, in terms of access to and consumption of different media sources (French and Chinese television, French and Chinese press, Western and Chinese social networks, etc.) in the Covid-19 era. In particular, authors focus on two main aspects of media consumption: media exposure in terms of the variety of media sources to which individuals have access and the polarization of media consumption between French and Chinese information sources. Subsequently, authors examine the effect of polarization of media consumption on media exposure. Because the Chinese population in France is very heterogeneous, authors study the divergence in media consumption across different groups defined by their migration trajectory (descendants, nonnaturalized migrants, and naturalized migrants), and the differential impacts of the pandemic on media consumption practices by these three groups in terms of the time spent on obtaining information and satisfaction with information on the pandemic. The descendants tend to have a preference for consuming French sources of information, and first-generation migrants, in particular those with a bachelor's degree or higher, tend to consume a larger variety of media, constantly comparing French and Chinese sources. During the pandemic, they have greatly increased their media consumption and are more satisfied than the descendants with information on Covid-19. Authors also show the link between media consumption and risk perception: migrants whose media consumption tends toward French information are less likely to use protective measures, because the social representations of Covid-19 in France portray it as not very dangerous. By contrast, the descendants, who also consume information from Chinese sources in addition to many different French sources, have a stronger tendency to use protective measures. Furthermore, they feel the need to put the information from French media sources into perspective with news from Chinese media sources.

## Keywords

media consumption – multilingual media sources – WeChat – Chinese language – French language – media exposure – polarization – information – satisfaction – Chinese diaspora in France – Covid-19 pandemic – migrants – descendants

## 1 Introduction

Ever since January 2020, when Covid-19 first emerged in China, its threats to health and social life, and the individual and collective measures to contain it, have dominated the media at the national and global level. The relationship between the media and the pandemic can be approached from multiple perspectives (Price and Harbisher, 2022). The first consists of studying discussion of the pandemic on mainstream media and social networks. Yu et al. (2021) studied 10,132 online comments related to Covid-19 on the TripAdvisor platform from January 1 to February 29, 2020. They show that the rapid and unpredictable spread of the disease drove a dynamic change in communication on social media regarding risk perception and the intensity of communication experienced by those who commented. Wicke and Bolognesi (2020) analyze concepts and discussions on Twitter regarding Covid-19 in March and April 2020 and the use of war-related terminology in framing the discourse on specific topics, such as the treatment of those who fell ill with the disease. Balech et al. (2021) construct a “microhistory” of reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic by French users on Twitter between February and May 2020, finding that masks emerged as a central topic of discourse and controversy in France.

The second perspective concerns the relationship between media consumption and mental health. On the one hand, researchers emphasize the role of crisis-related media exposure in amplifying the public health consequences of Covid-19 (Garfin et al., 2020). Following this approach, scholars examine the relationship between Covid-19-related media and a deterioration in mental health. Schmidt et al. (2021) describe a feedback loop in which consuming crisis-related media and worrying have a reciprocal impact over time, as each feeds the other and might amplify the adverse effects of the crisis and other similar crises on mental and physical health. First et al. (2021) show that Covid-19 coverage in the media (traditional and social) and interpersonal communication have a direct effect on stress and an indirect effect on stress and depression. In a study of over 1,118 Chinese in 30 provinces in mainland China, Liu and Liu (2020) show that four types of media (official media, commercial media, social media, and overseas media) have negative effects on their

audiences to different degrees. Based on a cross-sectional telephone survey conducted in Hong Kong between May and August 2020, Wong et al. (2021) find that, among 3,421 adults age sixty and older, the use of social media to obtain information related to Covid-19 is associated with more symptoms of anxiety and lower social trust in information but has no significant relationship to Covid-safe behavior. Along the same lines, by reversing the relationship and focusing on Chinese college students from March 24 to April 1, 2020, Zhao and Zhou (2021) show that Covid-19 stress is positively related to a tendency toward addictive use of social media. People who experience more Covid-19-related stress are at increased risk of addictive use of social media, which in turn may be fostered by active use and experience.

Moreover, studies have shown that the media coverage of the pandemic, particularly in the first few months, which discussed the disease with a racial lens and reported multiple racist incidents related to Covid-19 that were directed at Asians, may have presented a significant risk to the mental health of people of Asian origin. In fact, many people of Asian origin started to realize that they could be accused of spreading the disease and that, for this reason, they could become stigmatized and targets of racism (Wu et al., 2021). Similarly, using a cross-sectional study of 430 US adults completed in May 2020, Tsai, Phua, Pan, and Yang (2020) investigate the relationship among news consumption, trust, intergroup contact, and prejudicial attitudes toward Asians and Asian Americans in the United States during the Covid-19 pandemic. They show that, among other factors, traditional news exposure, and trust in social media were positive predictors of prejudice against Asians and Asian Americans. Tsai et al. also state that the Asian population's experience with racial prejudice during a challenging pandemic might have caused poor psychological outcomes and exacerbated health disparities.

Emerging research also examines how media coverage of disease (in particular, Covid-19) and media consumption might influence people's health behavior and their compliance with preventive measures. In a study carried out in the United States, Nazione, Perrault, and Pace (2021) analyze the relationship between mediated and interpersonal information consumption, risk perception, perceptions of general efficacy, and preventive behaviors specific to Covid-19.<sup>1</sup> Nazione et al. show that the time spent consuming news, social media, and health website information is not related to risk perception, whereas perceived risk and perceived general efficacy are positively associated with preventive behavior.

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1 Efficacy is defined as the belief that someone can perform the suggested behavior to combat the risk and as the belief that the suggested behavior will effectively combat the risk.

Focusing on the opportunities for health education using digital media, Liu (2020) tests the links between four types of digital media consumption (social media, mobile social networking apps, online news media, and social livestreaming services) and preventive behavior against infection with Covid-19. Liu states that digital media consumption is related to preventive behavior through stress. Based on an online survey with 511 respondents, Liu finds that, by seeking Covid-19 information through these four types of digital media, people are encouraged to engage in preventive behavior either directly or indirectly. Notably, doing so on mobile social networking apps, social livestreaming services, and online news media is directly related to preventive behavior whereas using social media might elicit intense anxiety and, in turn, increase preventive behaviors.

Using data from a representative sample of people in the US, Jiang et al. (2020) analyze the relationship between attention to news media and social-distancing behavior and three potential mediators in this relationship: (1) perceived effectiveness of social distancing, (2) perceived susceptibility to Covid-19 infection, and (3) perceived negative consequences of infection. Jiang et al. find that attention to news media is positively related to social-distancing behavior during this period and is mediated by the perceived effectiveness of social distancing. Conversely, media trust negatively moderates the impact of news attention on the perceived effectiveness of social distancing, with a more pronounced effect on those who have lower trust in media. Overall, the study finds that, when they emphasize safety measures, news media have an important role in promoting social-distancing behavior. In a study focused on Lebanon, Melki et al. (2021) show that increased exposure to media conveying Covid-19 news is positively related to people's compliance with preventive measures and that perceived knowledge and fear mediate this relationship.

In sum, these studies on media consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic illustrate a wide range of approaches. They show that the treatment of Covid-19 in official media and social media varies greatly over time and across socio-political contexts. Moreover, these studies suggest that media consumption during Covid-19 might affect individual mental well-being, fuel the feeling of racial stigma, influence the adoption of protective behaviors and practices, and support the successful implementation of national and international policies to control the spread of the virus. We note that these studies examine official media and social media as mediators and vectors of information. But they examine the impact of the media regardless of the nature and content of the information mediated through that vector, paying little attention to the messages and representations being mediated. We believe that the impact of media and social media on individual and collective experiences is strongly

related to the content of messages and the type of representations disseminated through different kinds of media and social media. Indeed, different groups in the same national context could have access to very different representations of social reality and historical conditions in relation to their media consumption practices.

In this chapter, we examine media consumption by the Chinese population in France. In particular, we analyze the differences in media consumption among different groups of Chinese in France based on their migratory status—that is, whether they are migrants or descendants of migrants and subgroups therein. We show that different subgroups of the Chinese diaspora in France might have access to different representations of the Covid-19 pandemic, based on their consumption of different media. Furthermore, these differential representations of the disease influence their experiences and their behaviors.

Our analysis builds on the fact that, as mentioned in the introduction to this book, from January to September 2020, the French and Chinese media described the pandemic and the institutional and individual measures needed to counter it in very different ways. Moreover, the institutional reactions at both the political and medical levels in the two social contexts were profoundly different. Since January 2020, the Chinese media had described the coronavirus as extremely dangerous and supported the implementation of strict control measures. Although these measures strongly limit individual freedom, they were necessary to limit the spread of the virus. In parallel with collective measures to limit viral spread, the Chinese government and media quickly and strongly encouraged the population to take individual measures, such as self-isolation and wearing masks. In France, between January and September 2020, in a context characterized by a relative lack of knowledge of the virus and the absence of a scientific consensus on its characteristics and severity, the media featured a variety of voices, expressing conflicting opinions and positions on both the severity of the disease and the need for collective measures to contain it. We believe that the experience and perceptions of individuals about the pandemic and, consequently, the protective practices adopted to avoid infection are affected by whether access to media narratives circulating in China, France, or China *and* France are singular or plural as well as by the ability to navigate between the Chinese and French media contexts, individual migration trajectories, and sociodemographic factors (age, gender, education, etc.).

We examine two main aspects of media consumption: on the one hand, we study media exposure in terms of the variety of media sources to which individuals have access; on the other hand, we study the polarization of media consumption between French and Chinese information sources. Subsequently,

we examine how media exposure affects the polarization of media consumption. Because the Chinese population in France is heterogeneous, we explore divergence in media consumption among different groups, defined by their migration trajectory. More specifically, we are interested in the differences in the media consumption practices across descendants of Chinese migrants, nonnaturalized migrants, and naturalized French migrants. We then study the differential impacts of the pandemic on media consumption practices among these three groups in terms of time spent on seeking information on the pandemic and satisfaction with that information. Finally, we show that because of their differential media consumption, different groups in the Chinese diaspora in France have access to different and contradictory representations of the disease and of the measures needed to counter it, leading to differential attitudes regarding the risk of infection, differential behaviors, and differential experiences.

The originality of our contribution is its interest in media consumption practices and the relationship between those practices and the pandemic by a specific population. Indeed, media consumption practices by the Chinese population in France has been little studied. Moreover, this work is novel because of it studies media consumption practices based on groups defined by their migratory trajectory and in relation to social changes caused by the pandemic. Moreover, we show that, the Chinese people living in France, though residing in the same spatial territory, have access to different narratives and representation of the Covid-19 pandemic through differential media consumption, which deeply affects their experiences and attitudes toward the virus and the measures needed to deal with it.

## 2 Variables

### 2.1 *Dependent Variables*

#### 2.1.1 Media Consumption

In our questionnaire, we asked respondents about their sources of information. Respondents could choose from several options among the following: French tv, Chinese tv, French radio, Chinese radio, French newspapers, Chinese newspapers, Western social networks (Facebook, Twitter ...), and Chinese social networks (WeChat, Weibo ...). We also asked our respondents which protective practices they adopted during the health crisis. Respondents could choose from among several options: Wearing a protective mask, Going out less, Not working, Not going to school/Not letting their child go to school, Not using public transportation.

The variable *Exposure to media consumption* is measured using an additive index that ranges from 0 to 8 by combining the responses to one item: Which media do you use the most to obtain information? French TV (no = 0, yes = 1), Chinese TV (no = 0, yes = 1), French radio (no = 0, yes = 1), Chinese radio (no = 0, yes = 1), French newspapers (no = 0, yes = 1), Chinese newspapers (no = 0, yes = 1), Western social networks (no = 0, yes = 1), Chinese social networks (no = 0, yes = 1).

The variable *Polarization of media consumption* is measured using an index that ranges from -4 (completely Chinese) to 4 (completely French), created by combining the responses to the question: Which media do you use the most to obtain information? French TV (yes = +1, no = 0), Chinese TV (yes = -1, no = 0), French radio (yes = +1, no = 0), Chinese radio (yes = -1, no = 0), French newspapers (yes = +1, no = 0), Chinese newspapers (yes = -1, no = 0), Western social networks (Facebook, Twitter ...) (yes = +1, no = 0), Chinese social networks (WeChat, Weibo ...) (yes = -1, no = 0).

### 2.1.2 Evolution in the Time Spent on Information

We asked our respondents the following question: Has the time spent obtaining information since Covid-19: “decreased,” “stayed the same,” or “increased”?

### 2.1.3 Satisfaction with COVID-19 Information

We asked our respondents the following question: Are you satisfied with the information about Covid-19 to which you have access? Respondents could answer on a four-point Likert scale (1 = not at all satisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = satisfied).

## 2.2 *Independent Variables*

### 2.2.1 Migratory Status

In order to understand the impact of the migratory trajectories on the experiences and behaviors of our respondents, we constructed a variable that we call “migratory status.” *Migratory status* is a hybrid variable built by a cross section of two variables: place of birth and nationality. We thereby obtain three groups: nonnaturalized migrants, naturalized migrants, and descendants.

Media exposure and polarization of media consumption are independent variables for explaining time spent on learning about Covid-19 through media and social media and satisfaction with information on the pandemic.

### 2.3 *Control Variables*

Age, gender, profession, and education (university-level education versus primary/secondary) are included in this study as control variables.

First, we analyze whether and how the migratory status, gender, and age of our respondents influence media exposure and the polarization of media consumption. Second, we look at how media exposure affects the polarization of media consumption. Third, we examine whether and how migratory status, gender, and age affect the time spent learning about the Covid-19 pandemic and the satisfaction with information about the Covid-19 pandemic obtained through the media and social media.

### 3 Media Consumption, Media Satisfaction, and Time Spent Seeking Information

#### 3.1 *Media Exposure and Polarization of Media Consumption*

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 present the results of a regression analysis in which we examine the effect of migratory status, sex, age and education on (1) media exposure, described as the variety of media sources to which respondents have access on a daily basis, and (2) the polarization in media consumption.

Model 1 explains only 6.2 percent ( $R^2 = 0.062$ ) of the variance in media exposure. Two of the four variables included make a significant contribution. Age seems to strongly decrease media exposure (Beta =  $-0.01$ , 95% confidence interval [CI] =  $[-0.02, -0.00]$ ): younger respondents use more media sources

TABLE 1.1 Regression analysis on media exposure

	Beta	95% CI	p-value
Migratory Status			
Descendants	–	–	
Nonnaturalized migrants	0.28	-0.01, 0.58	0.061
Naturalized migrants	0.42	-0.08, 0.92	0.10
Age	-0.01	-0.02, 0.00	0.033
Sex			
Women	–	–	
Man	0.20	-0.08, 0.48	0.2
Education			
High school or less	–	–	
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.52	0.22, 0.81	<0.001
R-squared: 0.06244			



TABLE 1.2 Regression analysis on the polarization of media consumption

	Beta	95% CI	p-value
Migratory Status			
Descendants	–	–	
Nonnaturalized migrants	-1.41	-1.66, -1.16	<0.001
Naturalized migrants	-0.75	-1.17, -0.32	0.007
Age	-0.02	-0.03, 0.01	<0.001
Sex			
Women	–	–	
Man	-0.18	-0.44, 0.07	0.2
Education			
High school or less	–	–	
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.62	0.36, 0.89	<0.001
R-squared: 0.035			

than their elders. However, the level of education seems to strongly increase media exposure (Beta = +0.52, 95% CI = [0.22, 0.81]): respondents with a bachelor's or master's degree use more media sources to obtain information than people with a high-school degree or less. Migrants, whether naturalized or not, seem to consume more sources of information than descendants do, and the effect is marginally significant.

In Table 1.2, model 2 examines the polarization of media consumption due to media exposure, migratory status, sex, age, and education. Descendants' media consumption tends toward French media (the overall intercept is 1.01, 95% CI = [0.61, 1.42]). But “nonnaturalized migrants” and “naturalized migrants” are negatively correlated to polarization toward French media (respectively, Beta = -1.41, 95% CI, [-1.66, -1.16] for nonnaturalized migrants and Beta -0.75, 95% CI = [-1.17, -0.32] for naturalized migrants) and, more important, their estimated coefficients are nearly zero. Therefore, migrants in general seem to have more hybrid consumption, with more access to both Chinese and Western media sources.

Age is also negatively correlated to polarization toward French media. By contrast, education is positively correlated to polarization toward French media: media consumption by respondents with a bachelor's or master's degree tend more toward French media than that of respondents with a high-school education or less. After media exposure is added as a predictor, the

variance explained by the model is 41.5 percent ( $R^2 = 0.415$ ). Media exposure has a strong and significantly positive effect on polarization toward French media: when respondents tap a larger variety of media sources, they add French sources more frequently than Chinese sources.

### 3.1.1 Media Exposure and Media Polarization among Descendants

In general, younger and most educated people engage with more media sources, especially French media sources. The increase in the variety of media sources mainly results from adding French media sources, which leads to polarization in media consumption toward French sources. A large difference emerges between descendants and migrants: descendants consume mainly or almost exclusively French media sources, but migrants have more hybrid consumption, engaging with both Chinese and French media.

Our ethnographic interviews and observations enable us to explain these trends. For one thing, descendants often have low proficiency in the Chinese language, therefore, they prefer (or consume exclusively) French media. Charles, a twenty-three-year-old law student, describes his media consumption as follows:

Q: From which media would you say you usually get your information?

Charles: In general, through social networks, which are on the front lines, so to speak, but they are not always the best for reliability. So, let's say that I prefer to read *Le Monde* or *Le Parisien* and science magazines, for example, *Science et Vie*, or magazines on history or physics.

Q: And when you talk about social networks, which ones did you have in mind?

Charles: Mostly Twitter and Instagram. But it's not really to get information; I just learn about a topic, ... For example, during the lockdown, there were two, three postings about Asians who experienced inappropriate behavior, ... I don't read about it on social networks; I just learn that it's something that exists. ...

Q: Do you read Chinese, for example?

Charles: No, speaking Chinese is already a problem, but reading is even more of a problem.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JUNE 2020

For descendants, access to Chinese media sources and information is often mediated by their parents or other family members who speak Chinese. These descendants can learn about information posted on WeChat through their

parents who use this social network or by overhearing Chinese television programs that their parents are watching.<sup>2</sup> This is true of Monica, a twenty-three-year-old student born in France to Chinese parents from Cambodia who went to France in the 1980s:

Q: And do you check Chinese sources?

Monica: Well, I don't really check Chinese sources. But I watch a bit of Chinese TV with my parents, such as [the Chinese cable channel] Phoenix TV. They watch a lot of [the cable channel] Mandarin TV, too, which shows some news. ... It's really their main source of news. They only watch Asian news—so, CCTV [Chinese Cable TV] and Cantonese channels. ...

Q: And they don't go to French sources for information?

Monica: Well, a bit less, as they don't speak French very well; they understand it a bit, but they still prefer to get their information from Chinese sources.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 8, 2020

Among the descendants, Chinese social networks are used very little for information, for two main reasons. First, some descendants express distrust of information from China and Chinese platforms, which they consider highly susceptible to “fake news.” Second, they criticize their parents' use of Chinese social networks, which they deem very superficial and uncritical. However, some descendants use Chinese social networks (especially WeChat) to keep in touch with friends or relatives who live elsewhere. For instance, Charles said:

Charles: For her [my mother], first-hand information is Chinese social networks, and her social network is WeChat. ... It is perhaps a little more susceptible to fake news. ... For example: the day before the lockdown [in France], they were broadcasting photos of war tanks in France, and she believed it [was actually happening]. I have the feeling that it came from WeChat. ... She tells me about it, typically at mealtime, and I try to ask

2 WeChat was launched in 2012 and rapidly became the most preferred Chinese social media platform. WeChat fundamentally changed the ways in which Chinese migrants use personal messaging and group communication, produce and distribute news, and access information. To understand the role of WeChat in the daily life of Chinese people, see Sun and Yu (2022); for a French study of WeChat use among Chinese, see Wang (2022).

her where she gets it from, and there is a good chance that it is from very unreliable sources.

Q: So you're quite skeptical of the information that is spread on WeChat?

Charles: Yeah, I am. ... On the other hand, on Twitter and Instagram, there is more often real news, but when it's fake news, it's the same thing I see on WeChat.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JUNE 7, 2020

### 3.1.2 Media Exposure and Media Polarization among Migrants

Our quantitative data indicate that when our respondents consume more media sources, they are more often French sources. In addition, the data show that the level of education strongly affects media exposure: the more educated our respondents are, the wider the variety of media sources they consume. Among migrants, the level of education also has an impact on the polarization in media consumption. Migrants with a bachelor's or master's degree consume more media sources than those with a high-school degree or less; they also consume more French media sources. For each type of media, migrants consume a variety of sources that convey different political positions and points of view. Qiaoling, a twenty-five-year-old migrant who is a graduate of the Paris Institute of Political Studies [Institut d'Etudes Politiques, called Sciences Po], describes her media consumption as follows:

In particular, I consume French sources, usually newspapers, radio, and, of course, mobile applications. In particular, I consult the mobile version of a newspaper [*Le Monde*]. For Chinese news, I use social networks, especially WeChat and Weibo. ... I think social networks certainly are less reliable than traditional media, such as newspapers or radio. ... During the pandemic, I mostly watched France Info. [...] I don't read the Chinese press, but I read the French press to get information about the pandemic. ... I always learn about Chinese news via Weibo or WeChat; I just read what is tweeted.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JUNE 5, 2020

Qiaoling consumes Chinese news in a rather detached and passive way, especially through Chinese social networks. Moreover, she believes that social networks are less reliable than the traditional media. However, she accesses many French media sources, which she actively uses to find information that might interest her, in particular on the health crisis.

Feng, a migrant, executive, graduate of Sciences Po in Paris, describes her consumption as follows:

In France, I get my information from newspapers and a little less from television, because I haven't bought a television yet. I also consult Chinese sources such as WeChat and Weibo. But there are also niche sites such as Chinese forums, for example, Rabbit, Zhihu, Hupao. ... In France I read *France Soir*, sometimes, *Le Parisien*; when I was learning French, I read *Le Monde*, and two days ago, I started reading *Le Canard enchaîné*. ... I think that different media have different political perspectives. I try not to take a position, because it is difficult to say whether it is right or wrong or whether it is good or bad.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 31, 2021

Like Qiaoling, Feng has access to general information through WeChat. However, she then seeks more specific information using specialized Chinese online sources, especially in forums. In addition, she uses both general and specialized French sources: she watches French television and has access to several newspapers. Two aspects of Feng and Qiaoling's media consumption seem interesting. First, they have language skills and cultural capital that enable them to navigate between various sources in different languages, to multiply the sources that they can access and to grasp the different positions expressed by various media actors. In the French context, marked by the number of and accessibility to both national and international media sources, we note the abundance and variety of the French sources consumed. In addition, Qiaoling and Feng adopt a critical stance toward information from both China and France: this stance consists, first, of not "taking a position" and maintaining a "certain distance" from the information and, then, comparing the different sources with one another and synthesizing the information themselves. A majority of those holding a bachelor's degree or more hold these skills and attitudes.

For example, these attitudes are evident in Li's statements. Born in China, she went to France in 2009 to study psychology and now works as a psychologist and is married to a French man. For her, the context of the health crisis has two effects: first, it reinforces the tendency to access many French sources (not Chinese sources) of information in order to understand what is happening "around her" (she consumes Chinese sources, especially WeChat, in a passive and marginal way); second, the context of the pandemic drove her to adopt a critical and comparative stance, which consists of accessing several different sources but maintaining a certain distance from them:

Li: I just read some independent French newspapers, which are probably a bit more specialized—for example, *Mediapart*. ... Then, during the pandemic, the TV news channel became a habit in our

house: we watch TF1 at 8 o'clock every day, we didn't even have this habit before. ... So, we watch the 8 o'clock news to start with, and then, for example, at 7:40, we have the news on Arte channel and then we switch to channel TF1, and after the news we turn off the TV. And then sometimes I listen to the news on Radio 2. ... It's just about knowing what's going on around us ... , and what is new in France. It's related to the pandemic, to see how far has it spread and what are the conditions at hospitals ... We tend to look at the official media, and then we filter out information that we think shouldn't be accepted.

Q: Do you look at Chinese media or Chinese channels?

Li: I look at some of the Chinese articles that appear in WeChat, but I don't look for that information specifically. I go to English news sources, instead.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 21, 2021

Li mainly uses French sources: several television channels, newspapers, and radio. Moreover, when she searches for more specific or specialized information, it is in French sources. She indicates that she has a much more marginal and passive consumption of Chinese sources. This consumption, which is very heterogeneous and very "French," can be explained by her cultural capital and her proficiency in the French language but also by her deep roots in French society: she studied in France, married a French person, started a family in France, and is integrated into the French labor market. She is, therefore, interested in understanding "what is going on around us," how the pandemic is evolving in France, in her town, and the conditions at French hospitals, therefore, she inevitably favors French sources.

Highly educated migrants (people with a bachelor's degree or more) thus obtain information from both Chinese and French sources. Chinese sources consist of Chinese social networks (WeChat and Weibo) for more general and passive information and online sites (Rabbit, etc.) for more specific information. In addition, they consume a variety of French media sources (newspapers, radio, television, social networks), for both general and more specialized information. This can be explained in three ways. First, several French sources are accessible; second, highly educated migrants have a generally positive view of French information (see Chapter 2); and, third, migrants feel a sense of local anchoring, as they have established a foothold in French society, where they study, work, and start families.

Migrants who do not speak French and have less education can access a more limited range of information sources. Because they do not understand

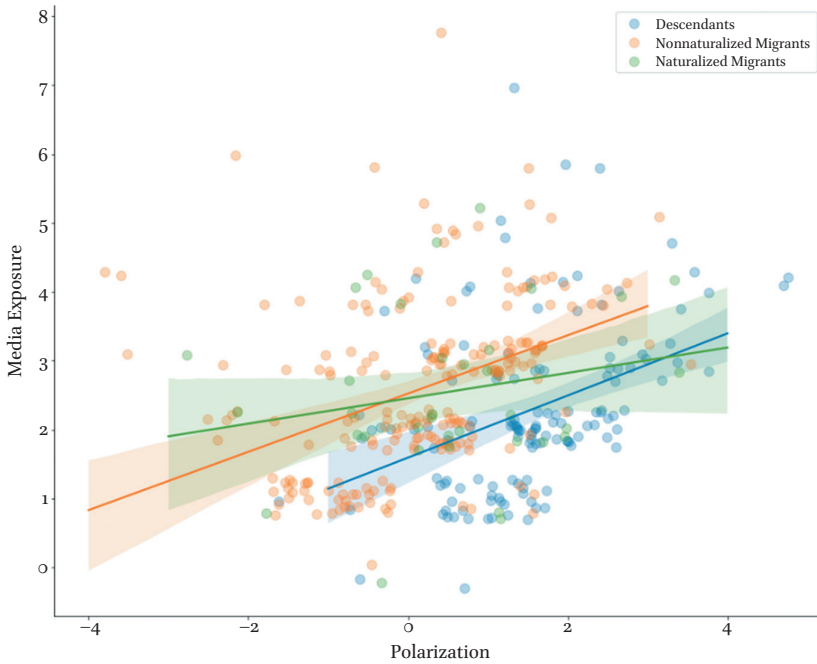


FIGURE 1.1 Scatterplot showing the relation between the polarization of media consumption (x axis) and the variety of media consumption across three groups defined by their migratory status (Descendants, Nonnaturalized Migrants, Naturalized Migrants)

French, they obtain their information mostly from Chinese or Chinese-speaking sources. Chinese social networks, especially WeChat, are their main sources of information. On WeChat, they receive information through official accounts, but also through exchanges in peer groups composed of friends, colleagues (former or current), and relatives living in China or elsewhere: the original source of the information that circulates within these groups is rarely indicated. This consumption of Chinese sources is accompanied by the consumption of Chinese television channels in France (Phoenix tv, Mandarin tv, CCTV). Among migrants who do not speak French and have less education, the situation for elderly Chinese is relevant. As illustrated in Chapter 6, elderly Chinese mainly obtain information from WeChat, a social network in which the only news that circulates is (re)published in Chinese and shared through groups of friends, relatives, and other users. The majority of these elderly Chinese have a television at home. However, they do not watch Chinese-language TV channels with the specific goal of being informed. On the contrary, it is just one of their everyday sociability practices. Elderly Chinese have very little

concern about the reliability or the quality of the information they receive from Chinese media and social media because they have been immersed for years in a monolingual media environment, governed either by the Chinese state (Chinese channels aimed at a foreign audience) or its spokespersons or collaborators overseas (Chinese-speaking channels created outside China).

The scatterplot above examines the relation between the polarization of media consumption (x axis) and the variety of media consumption across three groups defined by their migratory status. The polarization of media consumption ranges from -4 (a media consumption polarized towards Chinese media) and 4 (a media consumption polarized towards the French media). The scatterplot shows that when the variety of the media consumption increases, it increases by adding mainly French media sources. This indicates that the consumption of various French sources is the primary cause of the multiplicity of media sources. To be more specific, the descendants who use a range of media only use French-language sources. One Chinese source (mostly Chinese social networks) and numerous French sources are consumed by migrants who are proficient in French and who use a variety of sources. Finally, migrants who lack French proficiency restrict their media consumption to a single source, typically Chinese social networks.

### 3.2 *Time Spent on Information and Satisfaction with Covid-19 Information*

In this section, we examine the differential impacts of the pandemic on media consumption practices by the Chinese population in France in terms of time spent on staying informed and satisfaction with information about the pandemic.

Figure 1.2 illustrates respondents' answers to questions about the level of satisfaction with information about Covid-19 (left) and evolution in the time spent on obtaining information about the Covid-19 pandemic (right). Overall, the patterns concerning satisfaction with information are quite similar across the three groups: the majority of respondents indicated that they are "Somewhat satisfied": 51 percent of the descendants, 45.7 percent of the naturalized migrants, and 58.8 percent of the nonnaturalized migrants. Divergence emerges in the extreme answers: descendants seem to be more dissatisfied (10.2%) than migrants, both naturalized (2.8%) and nonnaturalized (3.3%). In contrast, migrants are more likely to be satisfied with the information (naturalized migrants, 22.8%, and nonnaturalized migrants, 15.3%) than descendants (10.2%). With respect to evolution in the time spent on obtaining information, the majority of respondents in all three groups say that they increased the time spent on obtaining information. However, two different patterns can be



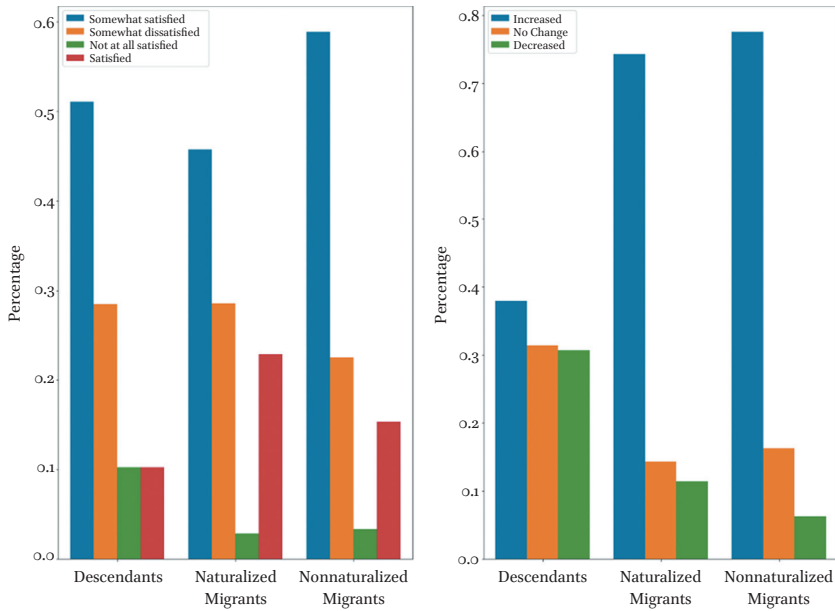


FIGURE 1.2 Bar plots showing the level of satisfaction with Covid-19 information (left) and the evolution of the time spent on information about the Covid-19 pandemic (right) among the respondents of the questionnaire

distinguished. On the one hand, migrants have largely increased the time spent on obtaining information (74.2% of the naturalized migrants and 77.7% of the nonnaturalized migrants), and only a small share claim that they have not changed their time spent on obtaining information (14.2% of the naturalized migrants and 16.2% of the nonnaturalized migrants) or have decreased it (11.4% and 6.2%, respectively). But, among the descendants, a more nuanced pattern emerges: although a small majority claims to have increased the time spent on obtaining information, a large share (31.3%) says that the time spent on obtaining information remained the same, and 30.6 percent claims that it declined.

In order to gain more insights, we performed a logistic regression analysis in which we examine the effect of migratory status, sex, age and education, media exposure, polarization of media consumption on (1) evolution in the time spent on obtaining information during the pandemic and (2) satisfaction with information about Covid-19 during this period. Figures 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5 illustrate the results of an ordinal logistic regression representing the relative risks—that is, the ratio of the probability of choosing one outcome category over the probability of choosing the baseline category.

Model 1 shows that migrants, both naturalized and nonnaturalized, were more likely than descendants to increase the time spent on obtaining

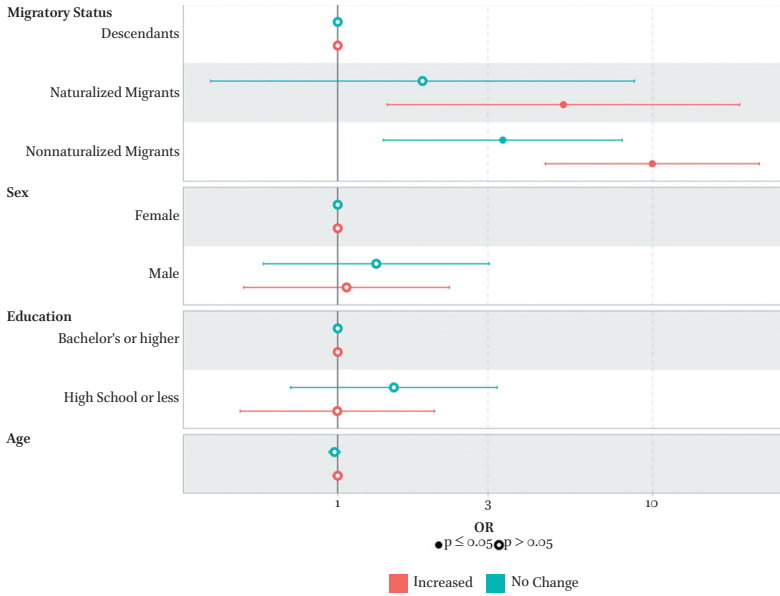


FIGURE 1.3 The effect of migratory status, sex, education, age, media exposure, and polarization of media consumption on the evolution of time spent on information about the Covid-19 pandemic

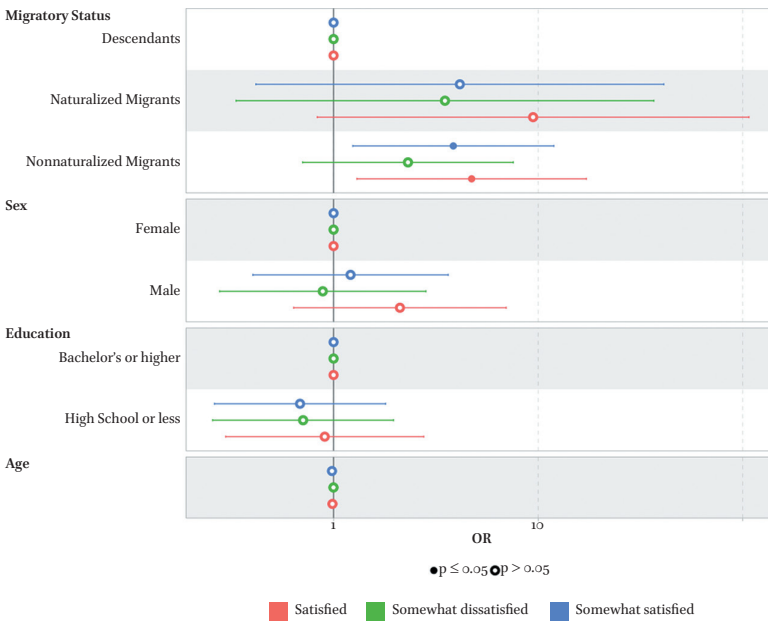


FIGURE 1.4 The effect of migratory status, sex, education, and age on the level of satisfaction with the information about the Covid-19 pandemic

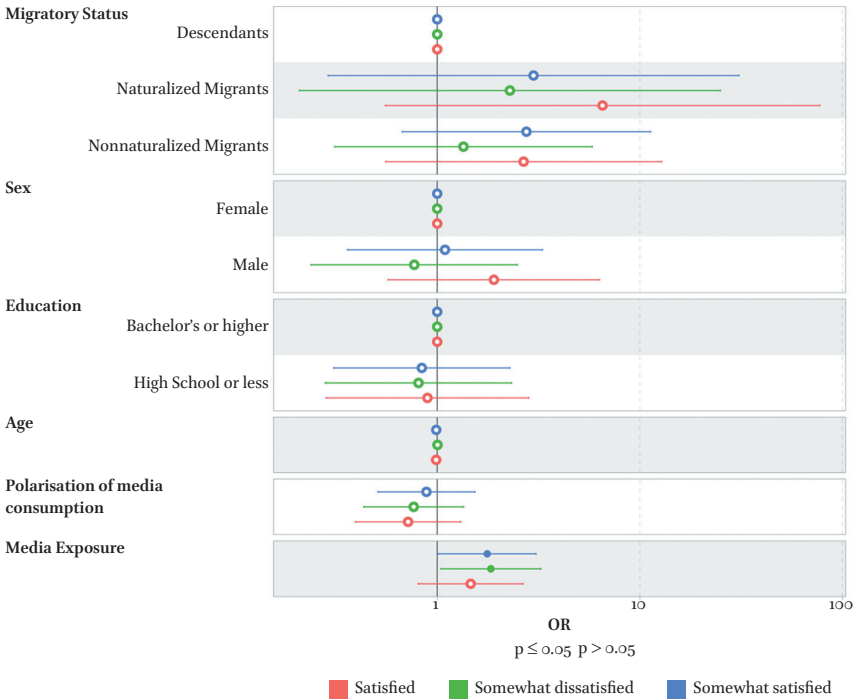


FIGURE 1.5 The effect of migratory status, sex, education, age, media exposure, and polarization of media consumption on the level of satisfaction with the information about the Covid-19 pandemic

information: that is, the relative risk ratio for switching from “decreased” to “increased” is 4.62 for naturalized migrants vs. descendants and 7.99 for non-naturalized migrants vs. descendants. Age, sex, education, polarization of media consumption, and media exposure have no significant effect on evolution in the time spent on obtaining information.

Model 2 shows that, when controlling for sex, education, and age, migrants, especially nonnaturalized migrants, were more likely than descendants to say they were “satisfied” and “somewhat satisfied” rather than “dissatisfied.” That is, the relative risk ratios for switching from “not at all satisfied” to “somewhat satisfied” and “satisfied” are, respectively, 3.84 and 4.73 for nonnaturalized migrants vs. descendants and 4.14 and 9.44 for naturalized migrants vs. descendants. These trends are confirmed after polarization in media consumption and media exposure are added to the model. Moreover, media exposure appears to have a positive impact on an increase in the level of satisfaction. The relative risk ratio for a one-percentage-point increase in media exposure is 1.84 for being “somewhat dissatisfied” vs. “not at all satisfied” and 1.76 for being

“somewhat satisfied” vs. “not at all satisfied.” The statistical analysis suggests that migrants are more satisfied than descendants with information about the Covid-19 and that the fact that they have access to multiple sources of information contributes to an increase in their level of satisfaction with information.

The ethnographic interviews provide some possible explanations of these trends. Migrants, especially highly educated migrants, feel the need to learn about the evolution in the pandemic in both China and France. This was particularly true during the first months of the pandemic, between January and May 2020. This need was often triggered by a feeling that the disease was very serious. In addition, they were greatly concerned about the physical and psychological well-being of relatives, friends, and loved ones in China and, as the pandemic spread to France, their own well-being. In January, China became the epicenter of the pandemic and the focus of international media attention. In this context, in January 2020, migrants, especially highly educated migrants, needed to learn about evolution in the pandemic in China using both Chinese and French sources.

Based on their statements, at least three factors drove migrants to seek more information. First, during the first weeks of January 2020, information was “hazy,” incomplete, and contradictory. Second, the Chinese government, Chinese media, and relatives in China described the disease as extremely dangerous and advocate very strict protective measures at the collective and individual level: this created concern over the physical and psychological well-being of relatives, friends, and loved ones in China. Third, the migrants perceived significant discrepancies between the statements about the danger of the disease and its evolution by Chinese and French authorities and the measures taken by the Chinese and French authorities to counter it. Thus, the lack of accuracy in information, the feeling of danger and concern about the well-being of relatives, and the perceived discrepancies between the respective postures by the Chinese and French authorities drove migrants to seek more information, to widen their media sources (French, Chinese, and other), and to compare them. This led to an increase in the amount of time spent on obtaining information. Bing, a thirty-year-old doctoral student in sociology, describes this period:

In fact, the information at the first stage [of the pandemic] was very vague; so, I mostly looked at official websites. ... Afterward, I mainly followed the Chinese health strategies, saying that “you have to put on masks” and “if it’s not necessary, don’t go out.” I completely accepted that and practiced it in France. I looked at both French and Chinese

newspapers and I took an average look, not a neutral one, by which I mean that when I look at positive news on the Chinese websites, I say to myself, “maybe [the situation is] not that positive, but when I look at the French critics of China and the discussions, notably, I look at *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, I say to myself, maybe [conditions are] not that bad. The two sources of information are both a bit too extreme. ... At that time, in January 2020, I was reading a lot of Chinese news to try to understand what this virus is; at that time, the French were demonstrating and going on strike; when I found out about the demonstrations, I was very worried because it’s like being in a restaurant, with proximity, shouting, and common gestures that would help spread the virus. And to find out about the [current] situation, I watch the local news, for example, FranceInfo or France 24, BFMTV, ... and also *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro*. ... I also get some distance and look at the news from mainland China from Taiwanese news to compare [them] because generally they say the opposite, so I will look for the differences. And it’s important to analyze. I think it’s the Taiwanese press that has used the term “Wuhan virus” most in the world.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

Bing’s experience leads us to consider a fourth factor that contributes to the increase in time that migrants spent on obtaining information. This factor is strongly related to the second phase of the pandemic outbreak. In February, Covid-19 began to spread in Europe, particularly in France. At that time, in addition to concern about the health of relatives in China, migrants were also concerned about their own health: they started to look for information about what was going on around them in France, in particular, the French government’s management of the health crisis and preventing the virus from spreading.

In their search for information, migrants, especially well-educated migrants, tap a wide range of information sources. They believe that, in France, they can easily find the information that they are looking for. They can read a variety of newspapers or specialized magazines in different languages, watch French or foreign television channels, listen to the radio or podcasts, search online using the main search engines. Thus they have the impression that they can easily access information, compare various sources, sort out relevant information, and summarize it themselves. This is particularly true when they search for information about the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic. The high level of satisfaction with information that migrants express

is related not only to the quality of the information per se but to the potential to access and compare several sources. Jianhe, a thirty-three-year-old nonnaturalized migrant and PhD student in sociology, describes the accessibility to information as follows:

Well, it's not difficult to find [the right information]. ... I use two [mobile] apps a lot—for *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*. And [I receive] a lot of messages [that I read] every day. If I want to get more information, or more targeted information, I just open Google and do a direct search, and I can get the information I need.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 10, 2020

In short, migrants who lack proficiency in French and those with little cultural capital cannot navigate the various media sources in different languages, this does not mean that they do not screen the media sources that they access. Mr. He, a retired employee in the catering sector, said:

Some information is too upsetting and hard to take. For example, a girl in Italy decided to commit suicide in front of her mother. This type of story makes me sad for a long time, so I avoid it; in other words, I choose which information I want to access.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CANTONESE, JULY 2020

A sixty-five-year-old interviewee, Ms. Zhang, who had retired from a job at a national firm in China and had traveled to France for a family visit but was stranded there because of Covid-19, does not speak French or English. During her stay in France (in 2020), almost the only way she could become informed was through WeChat.

There is no TV at my daughter's house. Of course, we exchange information on Covid-19 with her that is in different languages and from different sources. But on my own, I can only obtain information through WeChat. I found some differences in the way that Covid-19 conditions are reported by different news sources: on the one hand, by Chinese media sources located in China and, on the other hand, by Chinese-language media outlets run by Chinese people in France. The first one conveys the Chinese government's ideas, and the second one translates the French government's plans into Chinese and disseminates the Chinese news from China. At the beginning of the pandemic [January and February 2020]

I only followed Chinese media based in China on the pandemic conditions. But it made me too stressed, and I couldn't fall asleep at night. Later, my daughter told me about this second type of Chinese media, based in France. The information about the pandemic is presented a little less dramatically, and when I read it, I feel less stressed.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Ms. Zhang's description highlights the nuances in the media posture by different sources of news even in Chinese. Based on the geographic source of media, the national context in which the media is embedded affects how the content is produced and how the Covid-19 pandemic is depicted. And all these elements undoubtedly influence the representation of the pandemic described and internalized by individuals (see below, section 4).

The descendants' stance seems to be more ambivalent. Indeed, 30 percent of the descendants said they had reduced the time spent on obtaining information. Moreover, although the majority of descendants responded that they are "rather satisfied" or "satisfied" with the information on Covid-19, they are less satisfied than migrants, and 10 percent said they are "not at all satisfied."

Our interviews highlight two factors that explain the dissatisfaction of some descendants. First, the many views and actors in the French media can present contradictory information and create some cacophony. Because of that context, some respondents said that they feel "lost" and "frustrated" and have lost trust in the messages transmitted and those transmitting them. Second, some respondents denounced the ethnic and racist comments about populations of Chinese origin that appeared in some French media, especially during the first phase of the pandemic, when the disease was strongly associated with Asian ethnicity. Camille, a student who is a twenty-three-year-old descendant, explains why she reduced her media consumption:

My media consumption decreased during Covid, because of some of the comments. ... Sometimes, I has nightmares about reading the comments in some publications, and then I start going crazy. ... And even the media coverage was unbearable. It was not informative, ... it made me tired. ... But the way that China was treated by the Western media, in my opinion, is very marked by a certain orientalism, by something that is "otherizing," ... [as if Chinese people form] a "shapeless mass," ... "they are numerous, it's their fault," as if they are people who are not individuals.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 4, 2020

#### 4 Access to Different Representations and Narratives on Covid-19

In this section, we show that the differential tendencies in the media consumption of different groups lead to various representations of Covid-19 and the measures needed to deal with it by delivering very different narratives.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the strong polarization in media consumption toward French sources and the partial and indirect access to Chinese information (due to a lack of Chinese-language skills) mediated by parents or family members put the descendants in a position in-between them. On the one hand, information from Chinese media and, on the other hand, information from French media. This intermediary position enables them to take a critical attitude toward the information that they obtain. But, at the same time, it exposes them to contradictory information: the Chinese media deliver strong indications of the severity of the disease and urgent demands for compliance with protective measures, whereas the French media present more flexible attitudes and temporize about the gravity of the disease.

Amanda, a twenty-three-year-old descendant who works as an executive in the insurance industry, describes her state of mind as follows:

Clearly, there are differences in how Covid-19 is presented: in France, we continue to go out, and everyone says, “it’s ok, it’s not very serious; there are no problems for young people; it’s just like the flu,” whereas in China my whole family says, “don’t go out, don’t go out.” [They offered] two conflicting views. ... So, I felt a bit in between the two, and I don’t know whether I should believe Chinese media, because I know how it works in China, and I know that in France, we also underestimate the situation. ... For example, in France, they said that we didn’t need to wear masks and that it wouldn’t make a difference, but in China, they said, “never leave your house without a mask.” ... I regularly view French media, but because I am often in contact with my grandmother [who lives in Cambodia] via WeChat, I often get feedback about Chinese media discourse. And so, based on my reading, I was not really concerned about the disease, however, because of what she said, I was still quite vigilant/aware.

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At the beginning of the pandemic, Amanda, like a majority of the descendants interviewed, was not worried about Covid-19; indeed, French media delivered rather reassuring messages. Still, she began to be careful after talking to her



grandmother in Cambodia on WeChat, because she gained access to Chinese information that was constantly conveying messages of danger and the need for vigilance. Amanda is aware of the differences in the political and media narratives about the Covid-19 pandemic between the French and Chinese contexts, and she feels like she is “in between.” She is also aware that these narratives deeply affect the attitudes and behaviors of her relatives and friends in France and China. Although she is suspicious of information from China, she starts to maintain some distance from information from France. This ambivalence between French and Chinese information can create tension and conflict, which are expressed with her family or among friends. These conflicts unfold with her family regarding the concerns and highly protective attitudes (e.g., total elimination of going out before the lockdown by the French government) by parents and the more relaxed attitude about protective measures and greater carefreeness by their children. In the friendship or work context, these conflicts are expressed in terms of vigilance by the descendants and the complete carelessness and lack of protective measures by their French friends or colleagues. Thus the descendants hear different and in some ways contradictory narratives about Covid-19 and the measures needed to address it. Compared to consistent messages on Covid-19 presented by Chinese media, the many contradictory positions aired on French media might produce a sense of confusion.

Awareness of discrepancies in the media narratives between the French and Chinese contexts is also demonstrated by the experience of highly educated migrants. After January 2020, they were quickly struck by the outbreak of the pandemic in China and by the narratives produced and disseminated through Chinese media and social media. Chinese media reported the lockdown of the Hebei region, the mobilization of thousands of doctors and nurses, the construction of new hospitals, and described the virus as extremely dangerous, encouraging the population to take protective measures immediately. Moreover, among the migrants, the Covid-19 outbreak recalled painful experiences with the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) pandemic in 2002 and the strict protective measures (at the individual and collective level) employed to counter it. In addition, in conversing with their families and relatives in China, migrants heard about concern over the virus from their parents and friends. After January, migrants began to worry about the virus and expressed concern about the physical health of their parents and friends in China and the possible spread of the virus in France.

Zhe, a thirty-six-year-old migrant from the Hubei region and a geologist at the University of Nancy, describes his feeling of stress and anxiety between

January and March 2020, when the virus was spreading in China and then globally:

To be honest, it was really scary to see those people [in the Hubei region]; many people in a panic looking for help, ... and watching the news [on Chinese media] about many families that lost loved ones, or an entire family that died, and so on; it is very sad. A more painful private thing: at the time, my grandfather and my cousin were infected, but luckily they survived, ... they were in the hospital for nearly forty days. ... Social networks are a good tool for getting information, ... but there is a problem: a lot of information is not verified and produces panic and false judgments. This is a personal example: at the end of December 2019, I saw in the news that someone had said that SARS returned to Wuhan, and some people were infected. Some doctors, such as Li Wenliang, passed information to their own small circle. ... When I saw this information, I became very afraid because I experienced the first SARS [outbreak]. ... My perception was that this new virus is very, very scary, and, if you get it, you will die. At the time, I saw some reports in Chinese media about someone who suddenly fell to the ground and died; when I saw this report, I became very, very nervous, because many Chinese people live in Nancy. At the time, it was the end of the French [winter] holidays, and many students from Hubei were returning to France.

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Zhe believes that, by describing the virus as extremely dangerous to people's health, Chinese official media and social media played a crucial role in the increase in stress and anxiety by migrants. The narratives and the descriptions spread by Chinese media (both official and social media) drove Zhe to change his behavior and attitudes and to take strict protective measures, such as asking his wife to stop working and isolating themselves at home very early on, starting "about February 29," three weeks before the national lockdown in France.

What I want to say is that Chinese media only spreads fear through terrifying reports, such as the young man who fell to the ground and died. ... I am an example of this myself: at first, I was really afraid even to go out. ... [or] to touch anything because I believed that I would get infected—after all, I have a wife and children at home.

Clearly, Zhe was aware of the different cultural representations of the disease in different countries: the Chinese media view in particular focused on "fear"

of the virus, whereas the approach in European and US media seemed more scientific, focusing on data, and describing the virus in less dangerous terms. These different representations affected the way in which people experienced the pandemic—specifically, the effect of Covid-19 on their personal level of stress and anxiety, as Zhe describes:

I continually followed the data from the United States, France, and Europe, but I slowly realized that if you look carefully at the data, and relevant academic papers, the average global mortality rate is about 0.1 percent, and it may be different for different ages. For example, the mortality rate for people under age fifty might be 0.0 or so, whereas for those over age sixty, the mortality rate is about 3 percent or 4 percent. This is why some people say that Covid-19 is just like the flu. I am not saying this to make people relax their vigilance, but ... what I want to say is that when I have more comprehensive data and papers, I will gradually calm down. Of course, I think it was necessary to take protective measures, but based on Chinese information, this was done blindly and created a lot of pressure on my psyche. ... My in-laws in China have not calmed down yet; for example, they know that [in France] 10,000 to 20,000 people a day are diagnosed [as being infected], so they believe that we are surrounded by the virus. They have been in a very fearful state ever since January 23, when the lockdown in Wuhan started.

Zhe has access to both French and Chinese media (and other international media) and can compare the information from both of them. Based on this comparison, his own representations of the disease changed, from being a deadly disease to one that, while serious, is somewhat less dangerous.

Like Zhe, many educated migrants compared sources from different contexts. This enabled them to look at the information with some mental distance to construct their own views about the disease and its dangers. As mentioned earlier, the ability to access information from multiple national contexts selectively helps them to feel satisfied about the information they obtain but, at the same time, increases the time spent in pursuing this information.

Finally, the quantitative data we collected shows that the media accessed by less-educated migrants was strongly tilted toward Chinese sources for linguistic reasons. This has a strong impact on their attitudes, behaviors, and protective measures. The effect of this differential access to narratives produced in French and Chinese on the behaviors of less-educated migrants is demonstrated in the following account by Amanda, a twenty-three-year-old

descendant and an insurance executive, about her parents' attitudes toward the disease:

Every time my father watches Chinese TV, he gets a bit worried, and then he watches French TV and says to himself, "well, it's not that serious after all." And so he goes out once or twice a day to buy a newspaper and groceries. He wanted to continue to go out, but my mother was really worried because she doesn't understand much French, and she doesn't know what is said on French media. She only has Chinese information, and so she says to my father, "don't go out, don't go out," but my father still wants to go out. ... Later, we became aware that sometimes a lot of fake news circulates in China, so we didn't know whom to believe. Because my father watches [the French cable news channel] BFM and hears what its reporters or French officials have to say, he trusts French information more. My mother, however, gets information from the Chinese media, so she gets the Chinese point of view. She understands much less French than my father, ... she doesn't know what is said in French newspapers, only what is said in the Chinese press and what my family in China says. We talked on the phone with our family in China almost every day, and they told us, "don't go out." They told my mother, "don't go out, stay at home, don't go out, even to go shopping. Go out once a week; go out as little as possible. Afterward, you have to disinfect all the groceries; disinfect yourself well and wear masks."

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Amanda describes the influence of media consumption practices on the attitudes of her migrant parents: her mother, who only accesses Chinese information, takes very strict measures, whereas her father, by listening to French news, downplays the severity of the disease as described by the Chinese media and allows himself to engage in more flexible protection measures.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, the majority of the elderly people interviewed criticize how the French government is handling the pandemic. Some Chinese nationalist discourses emerge in the WeChat group by older people who are nostalgic for the Maoist period. Obviously, when these elderly people talk to their children and grandchildren, they feel out of step with them, as illustrated by Amanda's comments. These discrepancies are largely fueled by the divergent in their media consumption in terms of the source and language. In Chapter 2, we analyze the discrepancies between different groups of Chinese living in France, and how these discrepancies translate into different attitudes and protective measures, in more detail.

## 5 Conclusion

Many studies have examined the impact of media consumption on collective and individual behavior across various groups defined by their demographics and their cultural origins during the Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers have looked at how different media (official media or social media) influence (or not) the adoption of protective measures at both the individual and collective level, affect individual mental health, fuel the feeling of racial stigma, and support the successful implementation of national and international policies to control the spread of the virus. A majority of these studies focus on the different types of media, but they give less attention to the content being broadcast. Our study examines the effect of multilingual media originating in different national and transnational settings on the behavior of Chinese people living in France by describing their different representations of the Covid-19 disease. Because the Chinese and French representations of the Covid-19 pandemic have been so different, we believe that the differential access to information, which is socially constructed in the two national contexts, heavily affects not only the perception of Covid-19 disease by the Chinese diaspora but also the preventive measures adopted (see Chapter 2).

By analyzing different media consumption practices by the population in France of Chinese origin, we highlight the differences between migrants and descendants in terms of polarization in media consumption and exposure. We find that descendants have highly polarized media consumption with a preference for French information, and that migrants, in particular those with a bachelor's degree or higher, consume a larger variety of media. We also show that highly educated migrants, who consume more media sources, tend to consume more media from French sources and continually compare French and Chinese sources. During the pandemic, they have strongly increased their media consumption and are more satisfied than the descendants with information about Covid-19. Finally, we show that migrants whose media consumption is highly polarized, with a preference for French information, are less likely to take protective measures, because of the France views of the disease that present it as not very dangerous or as dangerous only for vulnerable populations. But descendants who consume Chinese sources in addition to the many French sources have a strong tendency to engage in protective measure. Furthermore, they put the information obtained from French media sources into perspective by comparing it with the information from Chinese media sources.

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# Out of Step: Preventive Measures among People of Chinese Origin in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic

*Simeng Wang and Francesco Madrisotti*

## Abstract

This chapter analyzes how people of Chinese origin have used protective measures during the pandemic and, unlike the general French population, anticipated the need for them. In particular, the first-generation migrants began to anticipate this need in January 2020, wearing masks on public transportation and in public places well before the French-born Chinese. The vast majority of our respondents had overwhelmingly adopted preventive measures by the beginning of March 2020, just before the general lockdown imposed by the French government. The French government started to recommend protective and social distancing measures on in mid-March 2020. People of Chinese origin said that they felt a large gap with the French population in the adoption of preventive measures. First-generation migrants quickly became deeply concerned about the emergence of the pandemic in China. They began to protect themselves early on, following the instructions and advice of Chinese authorities disseminated on official media and social media, particularly WeChat. Descendants became aware of conditions in China from their parents and relatives living in China. However, they maintained a certain distance, and, in line with the announcements by French authorities, did not believe that the virus posed a major danger in France. Finally, descendants adopted protective practices in a relatively flexible manner, particularly with the goal of protecting and pacifying their parents. Descendants saw themselves as in between and caught in a contradictory position. As Covid-19 conditions in France deteriorated, the attitudes of descendants about the virus began to resemble those of their parents and differ from those of their French relatives, friends, and colleagues. The last section of this chapter focuses on vaccination practices and respondents' perceptions of vaccines as one way to protect themselves.



## Keywords

preventive measures – mask – lockdown – risk – social distancing – vaccination – WeChat – Chinese diaspora in France – Covid-19 pandemic – migrants – descendants

## 1 Introduction

Countries have adopted different health policies to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. Their policy guidelines are the primary factor that determine mask use and risk-mitigation behavior by citizens in different national contexts. A lot of research takes a comparative approach and aims to identify national distinctions by comparing the health policies and protective measures of different countries during the pandemic. Through a cross-sectional survey looking at the use of masks and other preventive practices in adults over eighteen years old and carried out in five cities (Sydney and Melbourne, Australia; London, UK; and Phoenix and New York, US), MacIntyre et al. (2021) state that cities with mandates had higher rates of mask use and that lower rates of mask use were related to negative experiences with wearing masks and to perceptions that Covid-19 is not a serious disease. Other scholars distinguish between society-level and individual-level preventive measures (Zhu et al., 2021), comparing the use of preventive measures among college students in the US, Japan, and China. They argue that Chinese participants, on average, reported more government regulations than did participants in the US and Japan. Chinese participants also perceived the pandemic as more controllable and preventable than did other participants.

Some researchers have identified many psychological factors, including fear and perceived threats, risks and expectations, conspiracy beliefs, trust in science, and political ideology (Zhu et al., 2021) as theoretical frameworks through which people's commitment to barrier measures during the Covid-19 pandemic can be measured. Other scholars adopt protection motivation theory (Milne et al., 2000; Rogers, 1975), which states that people act on health warnings and adopt precautionary measures only if they (1) perceive a threat to be severe, (2) consider themselves personally susceptible or vulnerable to the condition, (3) believe that the recommended protective behavior is effective, and (4) consider themselves capable of engaging in the behavior. Researchers who applied this theory to the general population in Belgium find a statistically significant relationship between response efficacy and self-efficacy and commitment (past and future) to barrier measures. However, individual vulnerability and

the severity of the disease did not have statistical significance in the adoption of barrier measures (van Loenhout et al., 2021).

Some quantitative research on immigrant populations provides descriptive insights into differences among ethnic groups regarding insecurities and risk perceptions during Covid-19. In Germany, among different ethnic groups (former Yugoslavian, Turkish, African/Middle Eastern, Asian), Asians were more affected by the pandemic than German respondents with regard to health but not regarding perception of financial risk (Soiné et al., 2021). The scholars suggest that the higher health risk perceptions among Asians in Germany could be related to the fact that the pandemic first emerged, and spread widely, in Asia. In the same vein, several studies focus on the Chinese diasporas and show that overseas Chinese report feeling out of step with the government policies in their host societies at the beginning of the pandemic. As shown by Lu et al. (2021), Chinese immigrants and Chinese nationals living in the US might develop feelings of alienation because they tap different media sources for pandemic information and then adopt protective behaviors accordingly. Looking specifically at Chinese students in the US, Ma and Zhan's qualitative study (2022) demonstrates that the experiences with mask wearing before and during the Covid-19 pandemic by these students were affected by their encounters with stigma and racism, as well as by their coping mechanisms. These students elaborated on several strategies that they used to cope with the stigma in the context of contrasting public health responses in the US and China. In Canada, Kong et al. (2021) state that Chinese parents with children who are sixteen years old and under were more prone to negative emotions (e.g., stress, anxiety, and fear) and more likely to adopt preventive behaviors.

In this chapter, we focus on the first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic in France and analyze two types of feelings of disconnect experienced by Chinese people there. The first is in relation to the wider French population; compared to the general population, Chinese people adopted protective practices early. By mid-March 2020, when the French government imposed the first lockdown, the vast majority of our respondents had already overwhelmingly adopted these protective measures, especially wearing masks. According to the EpiCov study carried out in France, immigrant background participants ( $n = 111\ 824$ , including first generation migrants and descendants, all origin countries combined) from non-European countries were, during the first wave of the pandemic (May 2020), more exposed to Covid-19-related factors and more respectful of prevention. Whereas 61.8% of the majority population reported not wearing a face mask systematically when outside, the proportion was lowest among first-generation Asian migrants (only 23.5%,  $P < 0.001$ ) (Gosselin et al, 2022).

The second type of disconnect revealed through our quantitative and qualitative data concerns social differentiation within the Chinese population in France in terms of attitudes toward protective measures. Migrants anticipated the adoption of preventive practices in January 2020 and preceded the French-born Chinese descendants in wearing masks on public transportation and other public spaces. This difference between first generation migrants and descendants is coherent with quantitative survey of the EpiCov (op. cit.): in May 2020, only 23.5% of first-generation Asian migrants reported not wearing a face mask systematically when outside, while the proportion among descendants of Asian migrants was 42.6% (Gosselin et al, 2022, op. cit.). Among the migrants, those who were older tended to protect themselves earlier and more comprehensively (in Chapter 6 we analyzed elderly Chinese as a typical subgroup). By examining these two types of feelings of disconnect, in this chapter we contribute to the protection motivation theory by showing how this theory operates in real life at an individual level and the nuances within an ethnically defined population that is highly heterogeneous in terms of class, age, and migratory status, and so on.

For this purpose, we focused on six protective measures: wearing a mask, staying home, avoiding public transportation, not going to school, not going to work, and getting vaccinated. We collected data on the first five of these measure from an online questionnaire and ethnographic interviews. We collected data on attitudes toward vaccination from interviews conducted by telephone and online discussions.

In the first section, we use quantitative and qualitative data as well as data collected from monitoring various media to study the experience of feeling out of step with the majority of the French population, in terms of attitudes toward protective measures. In the second section, we use quantitative and qualitative data to examine differences within the Chinese diaspora in France, in particular, differences between Chinese migrants and their descendants.

## 2 Being out of Step with the Majority of the French Population

### 2.1 *Various Narratives about Coping with Covid-19*

People of Chinese origin who live in France were aware of the Covid-19 pandemic early on. Since January 2020, Chinese political and medical authorities as well as official media and social media channels have presented the virus as extremely dangerous. Because they receive information from these sources and from their relatives in China, Chinese people in France began to worry about the possible spread of the virus in France very early on and

adopted protective measures to avoid infection. Chinese authorities took drastic steps to stop the virus from spreading. Lockdowns in China began at the end of January 2020, at first in the Hubei region, and hundreds of millions of people have worn protective masks in public places throughout the country. Those who have been exposed or infected have been quickly placed in strict isolation, sometimes in situ. By consuming Chinese official media and social media (see Chapter 1) and communicating with their families and loved ones, Chinese people in France were aware of both the pandemic situation in China and of the narratives circulating in China.

In contrast, the French government first presented Covid-19 as a remote and manageable risk; this attitude gradually but significantly changed over time, with some contradictions in the French responses to the pandemic as conditions evolved. On February 18, 2020, Olivier Véran, the minister of health, announced on the news channel France Inter: “France is ready because we have an extremely solid health system.”<sup>1</sup> A week later, in an interview given to RTL radio on February 25, he said: “As I speak, no more patients are moving around France, [and] no more patients are hospitalized. The last patient was discharged yesterday from a hospital in Lyon.”<sup>2</sup> This was particularly disturbing to many Chinese migrants because, at the time, the public health crisis was at its height in China, and the first infections and the first deaths had already been reported in France. A few days later, on March 3, Sibeth Ndiaye, a government spokesperson, announced on France Inter: “We will not close all schools in France,” and “If we fall into Stage 3, i.e., an epidemic that spreads throughout the country, we will not stop life in France.”<sup>3</sup> On March 6, 2020, President Macron declared: “Life goes on. There’s no reason to change our habits, except among fragile populations.” These kinds of statements certainly had a large impact on how the French population responded to the pandemic: few people took preventive measures, at least until the beginning of the first national lockdown. National media outlets reported incidents of partying in many major French cities, such as Lyon and Paris, on the night of Saturday, March 14, 2020. These parties lasted until midnight on Sunday the fifteenth, in order

1 The interview is available at <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/l-invite-de-8h20-le-grand-entretien/l-invite-de-8h20-le-grand-entretien-18-fevrier-2020/> [in French].

2 The interview is available at <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/bien-etre/olivier-veran-sur-rtl-il-y-a-beaucoup-d-alertes-mais-aucun-test-positif-au-coronavirus-7800152816/> [in French].

3 The interview is available at <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/l-invite-de-8h20-le-grand-entretien/l-invite-de-8h20-le-grand-entretien-04-mars-2020/> [in French].

to “celebrate” the last night before all “non-essential” public places closed, and the national lockdown began.<sup>4</sup>

These differences in the narratives between the French and the Chinese context were crystalized by the mask controversy in France. In China wearing a mask had been mandatory since January 2020. This form of protection was presented as an essential factor in preventing spread of the virus and as a necessary measure to protect oneself against infection. In contrast, the use of protective masks by the French population became widespread a few months later, in July 2020, as it became the subject of a major controversy in January 2020, which revealed contradictions in the French government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. On January 21, 2020, the health minister at the time, Agnès Buzyn, announced in a press briefing that “the risk of introduction in France [of the virus] is low but cannot be ruled out, especially as there are direct air links with Wuhan” and that “our health system is well prepared, [and] health professionals and establishments have been informed.” A few days later, at a meeting on January 26, 2020, to discuss Covid-19 with Defense Minister Florence Parly, Sibeth Ndiaye, Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, Minister of Transport Jean-Baptiste Djebbari, and Nicolas Roche, the director of the Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she stated: “We have tens of millions of masks in stock in the event of an epidemic; these are things that are already planned.”<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to these statements, the French health-care system and manufacturing industry experienced a major shortage of masks that was widely reported in the media. As early as March 13, the press reported about the surprise of the population and the anger of health-care workers and other exposed professionals who were unable to obtain upgraded masks (Triquet, 2021). Many of our respondents bought masks in January and early February; however, after mid-February 2020, they found themselves unable to purchase more protective masks.

As the pandemic spread in France, French health-care authorities began to encourage the population to protect themselves and wear masks. On April 3, Jérôme Salomon, the director general of health, stated: “We encourage the general public, if they wish, to wear ... these alternative masks that are being produced.” However, the government’s communication remained ambiguous on this subject. On April 20, Ndiaye said that there was “no scientific consensus

4 *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/03/15/c-est-une-derniere-nuit-une-nuit-historique-le-soir-ou-la-france-est-passee-au-stade-3\\_6033128\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/03/15/c-est-une-derniere-nuit-une-nuit-historique-le-soir-ou-la-france-est-passee-au-stade-3_6033128_3224.html) [in French].

5 This is how France Inter reported this statement: <https://www.franceinter.fr/societe/penurie-de-masques-les-raisons-d-un-scandale-d-etat/> [in French].

at this stage on the usefulness for all French people of wearing a mask." Wearing a mask on public transportation (train, subway, rapid transit, bus, trams) and inside stations was required in France on May 11, after a national system was established to manufacture masks and PPE, and the supply problem was solved. Wearing a mask became compulsory in all indoor public places only as of July 20, 2020. On the one hand, this confusion certainly affected the French population's attitudes toward the use of protective masks in public spaces. On the other hand, it contributed to an increase among the Chinese population in feeling out of step with the general public.

### 2.2 *Anticipating the Arrival of the Virus*

These different narratives in the Chinese and French context certainly lead to different attitudes by the Chinese and French populations in relation to the adoption of protective measures. In the online questionnaire, we asked respondents the following question: "What protective measures have you taken since the beginning of the Covid-19?" They could choose a response from among the following options: (1) wearing a protective mask, (2) staying home, (3) not going to work, (4) not going to school, (5) avoiding public transportation. We also asked respondents to specify the month in which they adopted each specific protective measure.

Figure 2.1 shows that, in the first stage of the pandemic, from January to May 2020, the most popular protective measure among respondents was wearing a protective mask (96.6%) followed by staying home (90.4%), avoiding public transportation (54%), not going to school (25%), and not going to work (14.9%).

These trends are more informative when they are viewed in relation to when they occurred. Figure 2.2 shows that, among our respondents, 21 percent overall began to wear a mask before March 2020, whereas 6 percent did so in January and 15 percent in February. Most respondents started to wear a mask in March, because of the spread of the virus in France and the imposition of the first national lockdown (March 16, 2020).

With respect to staying home to avoid exposure, people of Chinese origin reacted very early. As shown in Figure 2.2, almost 26 percent of the respondents began to stay home before the first national lockdown: 6.2 percent had already started to stay home in January 2020 and 19.5 percent in February 2020. By March 2020, when leaving one's residence was restricted as per measures adopted by the French government to reduce the spread of the virus, 61 percent of the respondents were staying home.

According to our data, the adoption of the other protective measures was less common and mainly began in March 2020. Before March 2020, 10.6

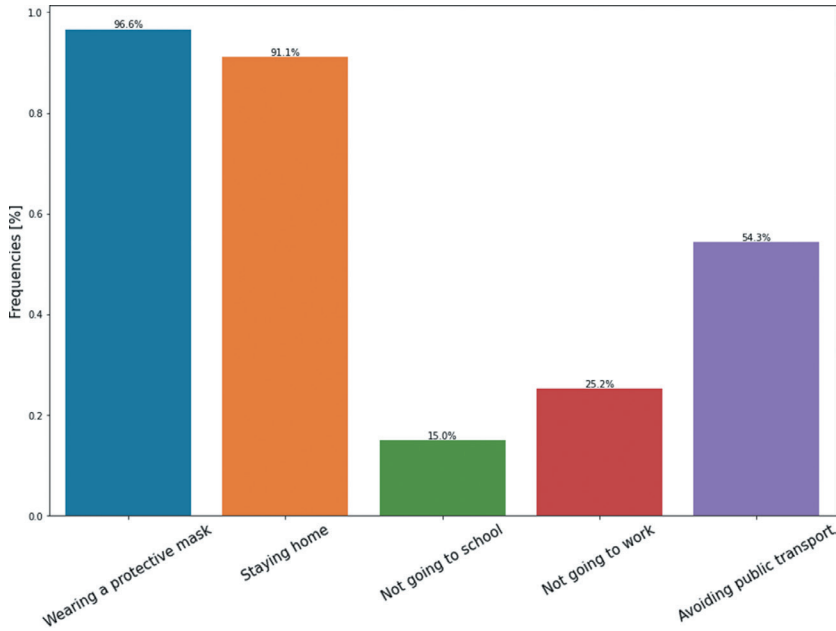


FIGURE 2.1 The most common protective practices among Chinese people in France from January to May 2020

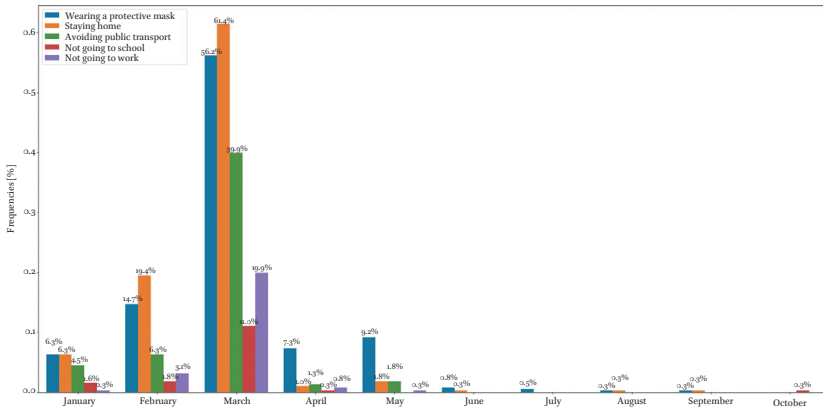


FIGURE 2.2 Timing of the adoption of the different protective practices

percent of respondents overall had stopped using public transportation (4.4% in January 2020 and 6.6% in February 2020), 3.3 percent had stopped going to work (1.5% in January 2020 and 1.8% in February 2020), and 3.3 percent had stopped going to school (0.2% in January 2020 and 3.1% in February 2020). The adoption of these measures was more common beginning in March 2020: by that point, 40 percent of respondents had stopped using public transportation,

11.2 percent had stopped going to work, and 19.7 percent had stopped going to school. However, these percentages were affected by the impact of the national lockdown, when schools were closed, working remotely was strongly encouraged, and people were not permitted to travel more than one kilometer from their homes. Nevertheless, the Chinese population in France seemed to anticipate the arrival of the pandemic in France and started to employ protective measures earlier than the French population did, especially wearing masks and staying home. As mentioned earlier, in May 2020, 61.8% of the majority population reported not wearing a face mask systematically when outside according to the EpiCov survey (Gosselin et al, 2022). The use of a protective mask became mandatory in France in some contexts only in July 2020, and only before a controversy about its effectiveness in protecting against infection and in reducing the spread of the virus.

In the same vein, studies on big data show that mobility levels in France fell sharply starting at the beginning of the first national lockdown and that, before this date, mobility levels were consistent with those the previous year. This also correlates with statements by French political officials, who, until the first week of March 2020, were very reassuring about the evolution and severity of the pandemic and urged the French not to change their habits, shown, for example, by the statements mentioned earlier, made by members of the government. They include a statement by Sibeth Ndiaye on March 3, 2020, that “we will not close all the schools in France” and that, “if we fall into stage 3, i.e., an epidemic that spreads throughout the country, life in France will not stop,” as well as by President Macron on March 6, 2020, that “life goes on. There’s no reason, except for fragile populations, to change our habits on going outside.” These kinds of statements certainly had a great impact on the behavior of the French population, as related to Covid-19. Considering that 26 percent of the respondents to the online questionnaire began to stay home before March 2020, we are inclined to think that people of Chinese origin began to do so before the French population did. In addition, they did so voluntarily, whereas the decline in mobility in France beginning on March 16, 2020, was in response to government restrictions.

### 2.3 *Other Protective Measures*

Although the other protective measures in the online questionnaire (not going to work, not going to school, avoiding public transportation) were not widespread and began only in March 2020, our ethnographic interviews highlight other ways in which the Chinese population anticipated both the outbreak of the virus and the adoption of the preventive measures to reduce exposure to and spread of the virus. For example, Mr. Xu, the owner of a Chinese restaurant



in Paris, stated that he had decided to close his restaurant before March 2020, when President Macron announced the national lockdown:

There was a party at my restaurant. The customers sang and danced there until after one o'clock in the morning. I just sat at the table outside and had a drink. I thought that at a party like that, the virus must be circulating a lot. When they left, I started to disinfect and clean. The next day, I decided to close my restaurant to avoid infecting myself, my family, and my customers. At that time, I didn't know that the government would ask all the businesses to close a few days later and order a general lockdown.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Mr. Xu was worried about the spread of the virus and the behavior of his customers who did not take any protective measures, so he closed his restaurant. This is particularly striking in view of the economic loss that Mr. Xu would suffer. Before the lockdown was imposed, very few shops and restaurants had closed because of the pandemic. However, the majority of those that closed were Chinese owned.

Bastian, a forty-seven-year-old taxi driver from Fujian who had fought in the French Foreign Legion after having arrived in France in 2004, described the protective measures he started to take in January 2020:

I think it was around January 2020 when I read about the new virus in Wuhan on WeChat, ... and, at the beginning, the rumors were a bit outrageous, and I was here in France with [a colleague] who had just arrived from China. At first, we were a little bit worried about our work, but we still had work to do. That's why we started to buy disinfectant and use it in our cars. In January and February, masks were already in short supply at pharmacies. So, some people bought them early on, some of them stocked up, and some of them bought them and sent them to China. ... At the beginning, I just used some disinfectant. ... And then later on, when the virus started to spread more and more in France, I bought a package of masks at the pharmacy near my house, with about forty masks. ... At that time, the French government was saying that masks are useless and that it was not advisable to wear them in public for fear of causing panic. We were afraid to wear them, too, for fear of being different.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

Bastian started to worry about Covid-19 at the end of January 2020. He was aware that the risk of infection was real in France because, driving his taxi, he

had several customers a day, some of whom had come from China. For these reasons, he bought hand sanitizer that he used every day and masks that he stocked at home but was uncomfortable wearing in public.

Another interviewee, Zhe, a thirty-six-year-old migrant who was a geologist at the University of Nancy, was very scared about the Covid-19 virus and the risk of infection. For that reason, he asked his wife to stop going to work and isolated his family at home in a voluntary quarantine starting “about February 29” (he estimated), almost three weeks before the first national lockdown in France began.

In addition to the fact that Covid-19 first broke out in China, Chinese people in France anticipated the outbreak of the pandemic in France and were aware of the dangers of the virus very early on for three reasons. First, Chinese political and medical authorities presented the disease as very dangerous and imposed strict collective measures. Second, Chinese migrants in France had access to that information via official media and social media channels as well as their relatives in China. Third, Chinese people were already familiar with pandemics that had spread in Southeast Asia over the prior twenty years (e.g., SARS, H1N1) and with the measures needed to deal with them. So, adopting basic protective measures was a something that many of them recalled from their home country.

#### 2.4 *Feeling out of Step*

Beyond the familiarity with epidemics, many interviewees of Chinese origin were very aware of the differences in these narratives about Covid-19 and in the different political reactions in France and China. For many of them, this discrepancy in the narratives and the reactions between the French and Chinese contexts was blatant and disturbing: they believed that the French authorities underestimated the disease, did not put in place the measures needed to stop the spread of the virus, and ultimately put lives at risk. These interviewees felt frustrated by the lack of reaction by the French authorities, compounded by some of the French media discourse, which some interviewees described as “China bashing.”

This frustration fueled a sense of being out of step with French society and of not belonging. However, their feelings were related not only to the observation of major differences in political responses and media communication between the French and Chinese contexts but also to a perception of profound differences between themselves and friends, colleagues, and relatives of French origin (and the French population in general) in terms of attitudes, behavior, and portrayals of the Covid-19 virus and the pandemic.

This is how Mr. Zhang, the manager of a food delivery company in France, described the gap between France and China:

France has only recently started to encourage the wearing of masks. The government has just announced that you have to wear a mask when you go out. Before this moment, for several months, there was no consensus on this opinion. They [the French political authorities and the general French population] think that wearing a mask is not necessary. Besides, when French people wear a mask, they wear it very badly, under the chin. This is dangerous and allows the virus to spread.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

This interview is particularly striking because it was conducted on July 24, 2020, more than two months after the end of the first lockdown. Zhang noted, indirectly, that France was seven months behind China in the normalization of wearing masks as a way to curb the pandemic. He also indicates with dismay that this commonplace protective measure is not done properly or respected by the people he meets.

Cifeng, a forty-five-year-old nonnaturalized migrant who arrived in France in 2004, obtained a PhD, and now works as a professor of Chinese at the University in Paris, described the sense of disconnect and frustration she felt toward her colleagues, in February 2020, when she began to adopt protective measures and urged her colleagues to do the same:

Cifeng: The week before the lockdown, I had lunch with several colleagues at the office. One colleague who lives in Normandy was quite worried because she takes the train twice a week, and she comes to Saint-Denis twice a week to give classes. She told me that she had written to the administration to find out whether it was necessary to adopt stricter preventive measures. She said that she was told not to worry. The administration said that there were a hundred cases a day, so there was nothing to worry about. That was ten days before the national lockdown. ... Among our colleagues, only a small minority of us were worried about the situation. This colleague who lives in Normandy started to alert everyone but was not taken seriously. Then, the following week, I had class on Monday, and the cases were starting to climb to over three hundred a day. There were rumors that we would soon have an Italian-style lockdown, and

a colleague told me that she was going to have a big reunion, a family party, in a few days. So, again, it confirmed my hypothesis that this public health crisis was going to get out of control because people were not at all aware of it. I always have the impression that people don't realize how serious it is. ... But it's not only the lack of information on the seriousness of the disease in France compared to the information circulating in China that poses a problem; I also see an inability to act collectively on this crisis. I'll give you another example. During the week before the national lockdown, on the very day that, in the evening, Macron announced the first national lockdown, I was at the university to attend a meeting. When I arrived, there were only two or three people in the room, so I opened the window to let more air circulate in the room, and I was told, "no, it would be too cold." When I expressed my concern to a colleague, she said to me, "You know, we're all going to die one day."

Q: And at that time, were you already wearing a mask?

Cifeng: I didn't dare to wear a mask in the street. I think that before the first lockdown, I only wore a mask in the Metro.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2021

In her account, we note Cifeng's concern and frustration at the lack of reaction by her colleagues and the university administration. Her frustration is heightened by the feeling that her professional environment does not take the pandemic seriously and underestimates the danger. The majority of her colleagues do not take any protective measures and seem to downplay the risk of infection: "You know, we're all going to die one day." In this way, her colleagues put not only themselves but also others in danger. Cifeng is dismayed that, in such a critical situation, her colleagues organize parties and family gatherings and do not protect themselves and their relatives. This makes her feel out of step and out of place.

Even at hospitals, health-care workers of Chinese origin faced a similar situation. Dr. Lei is a doctor who finished her studies in France and opened a practice in Bussy St-Georges in 2019. She had learned about the danger of the virus from both Chinese and French sources starting in early January. So, she started to wear a mask and PPE when treating her patients. She noticed that her colleagues did not take any protective measures and felt critical of them. Her attitude frightened some patients.

I was the first in my office to wear a mask as soon as possible when treating my patients, starting in January 2020. I wore a mask and PPE and that scared a lot of patients, even the patients of my colleagues. I'm not going to say that they made fun of me, but they thought it was excessive, saying, "The epidemic is far away; do you think you're protecting yourself like that?" ... I also received a lot of negative comments from French patients, who said, for example, that "it's not necessary to wear a mask; it's a bit of a joke." Others said that "it's not necessary to wear a mask; it's an overreaction."

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

This interview clearly echoes two earlier interviews. Cifeng's interview demonstrates the same anxiety, frustration, and feeling of being out of step that Xu felt when he observed his restaurant patrons partying without worrying about the risk of infection and without wearing any form of protection. These interviews are also similar to Bastien's interview. Cifeng, Dr. Lei, and Bastien all stated that they were very worried about the risk of infection, that they were aware of the effectiveness of wearing a protective mask, but that they did not dare to wear it in public. This attitude was very common among the migrants whom we interviewed, especially between January and March 2020. As discussed in Chapter 10, in a global context of the racialization of the disease, many people were directly subjected to, or witnessed, racist attacks: these attacks were aimed in particular at people perceived as Asian who were wearing a protective mask. They were accused of being carriers of the virus and of contributing to its spread in France. The experience of racist attacks, coupled with a feeling of being out of step with the majority French population in perception of the danger of the disease and the need to take protective measures, as well as media campaigns targeting health management in China, led to feelings of frustration and displacement and of not belonging to French society among the Chinese people whom we interviewed.

In some cases, this feeling of disconnect with French society is coupled with a feeling of resentment toward their country of origin, leading to a heightened sense of not belonging (Gao, 2021). This is due in particular to the strict barriers that Chinese authorities put in place to control the mobility of the Chinese population outside the country, especially their ability to return to China. These measures include explicit incentives not to return and potentially import another strain of the virus to China, mandatory quarantine in a hotel, and required predeparture screening tests carried out by only a few

laboratories recognized by the Chinese embassy in France. This is how Bastien, the taxi driver, described it:

At that time, all flights were stopped, and it was said on the Chinese internet that people living in foreign countries were forbidden to return to their home country. This put some psychological pressure on those people ..., I just think that this situation might be troubling and will last a long time.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

Although a large majority of Chinese people in France have noted the delays, contradictions, and vagueness in the measures that the French authorities have taken to control the spread of Covid-19 and protect French citizens, at the same time, many have acutely felt the consequences of the measures taken in China and cannot return to their home country. In this way, some respondents felt as if they were not protected in France and were simultaneously stigmatized by the Chinese authorities.

### 3 Different Preventive Measures Employed by Chinese People in France

In the first section, we showed the disconnect that people of Chinese origin living in France felt with the majority French population during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of the perception of the risk linked to the pandemic and the need to adopt protective measures. In this section, we examine in more detail how this disconnect is expressed by different groups of Chinese people in France.

#### 3.1 *A Generation Gap*

Figure 2.3 lists the answers to the question “What protective measures have you taken since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in the following periods?” based on the respondents’ migratory status. In all three groups, the most widespread protective measure is wearing a mask (95.6% of descendants, 97.6% of migrants who are nonnaturalized, and 94.3% of naturalized migrants), followed by staying home (87.6% of descendants, 93.3% migrants who are nonnaturalized, and 91.4% of naturalized migrants) and avoiding public transportation (61.3% of migrants, 50.2% of migrants who are not naturalized, and 51.4% of migrants who are naturalized). Not going to school and not

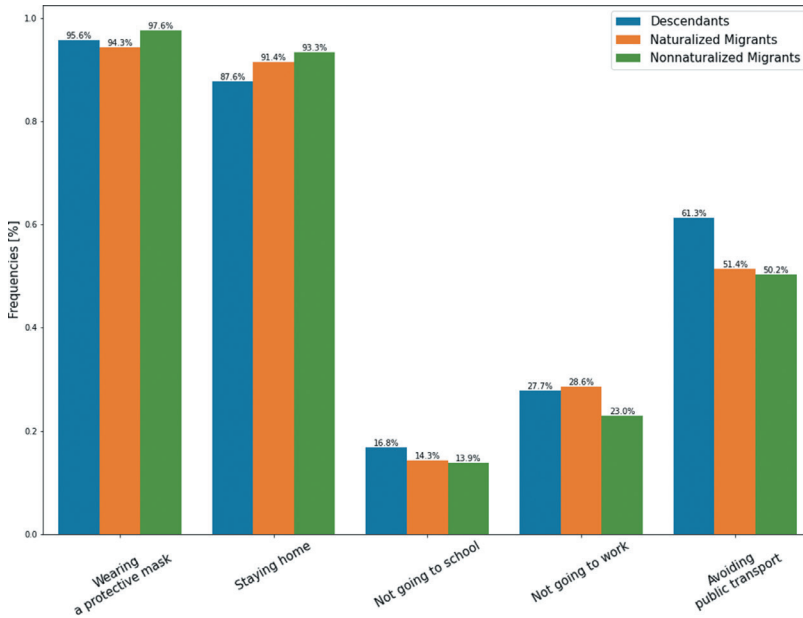


FIGURE 2.3 The most common protective practices from January to May 2020 across groups defined by their migratory status

going to work are less common measures. The patterns in the three groups are very similar, with similar behavior.

Some differences emerge when we examine the timing of the adoption of these protective practices (see Figure 2.4). We see that 30 percent of the migrants who are not naturalized started to wear a mask before March 2020 (9% started in January 2020 and 21% in February 2020) in contrast to only 14 percent of the descendants (4% in January and 10% in February). Moreover, nonnaturalized migrants started to stay home earlier than descendants: 29.6 percent of nonnaturalized migrants began to stay home before March 2020, as opposed to 21.6 percent of the descendants.

These trends are linked to differential socialization in the Chinese and French contexts. Descendants are extremely embedded in the French social context: many of them have little to no proficiency in the Chinese language, have not spent significant time in China, and consume French media almost exclusively; at the same time, they consume French and Western media extensively, and their social circles are composed mainly of French people (see also Chapter 1). For this reason, following the messages from French authorities, many of them did not think that the pandemic would affect France, let alone

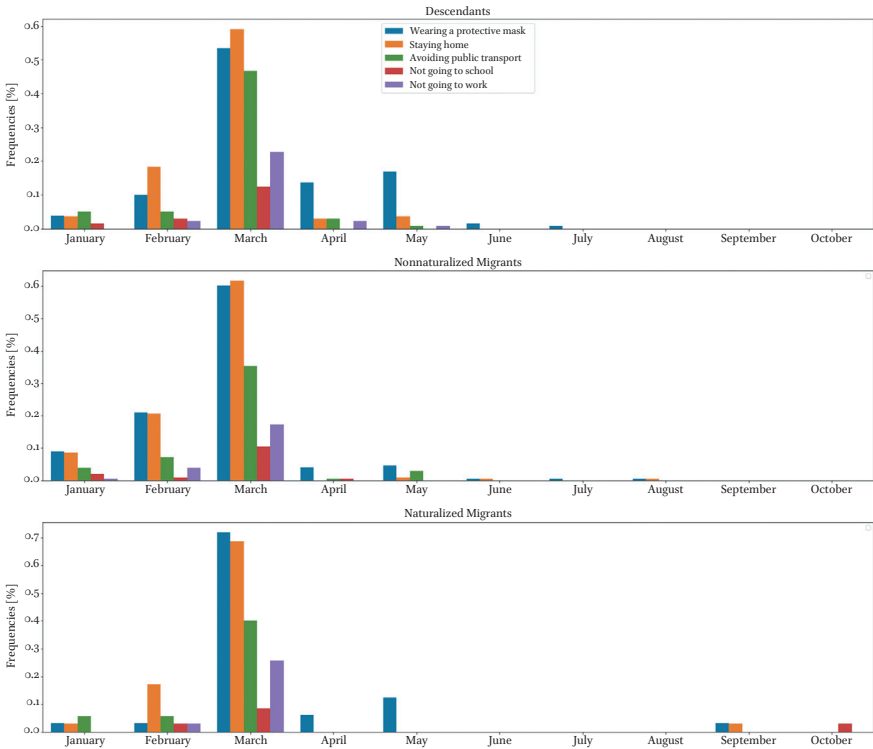


FIGURE 2.4 Timing of the adoption of the different protective practices across groups defined by their migratory status

at the scale that it did. This is reflected in comments by, for example, of Louise, a twenty-seven-year-old digital marketing executive who lives in a suburb of Paris and spent six years in China:

Louise: In early January 2020, when the news started circulating in China, I learned from my family there that a virus—pneumonia—was spreading. I knew about SARS, and at the time I was in China I lived through H1N1, the swine flu, so pneumonia was not something new for us. ...

Q: And how did you react at that time?

Louise: Well, I thought it wouldn't affect us, because when I was in school and SARS was spreading in Asia, my family in France had barely heard about it. I thought that it was only going to stay in Asia, and that we were far away from all that, that it wasn't going to happen in France. ... not at this scale, anyway. For me, it was something far away, [so] I didn't feel concerned.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020



For Louise, this relative lack of concern continued, as China declared a general lockdown in the Hubei region. However, when the virus began to spread in Europe, concern increased. Memories of epidemics in China as well as echoes of information coming from China pushed Louise to start taking protective measures in early February 2020, much earlier than her French friends and colleagues did:

I thought it was starting to get a bit risky in France, I thought we were going to wear masks, but really in my head I thought we were never going to be locked down. But then I started to be a bit afraid; in the metro I was careful, I tried to avoid going to places where there were a lot of people and, then, began wearing a mask. I was a bit afraid to wear a mask because there was a lot of stigma on the street about Asians, so I was afraid of that, too, but I felt that I needed to wear a mask and wash my hands more often.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

The attitudes of these descendants are linked to their socialization, which is influenced by both the French and Chinese contexts, although not symmetrically. The descendants found themselves caught between two worlds. They had some access to the information circulating in the Chinese context through their parents, who maintain a strong link with China and also consume Chinese media, whereas they consume mainly French and Western media. This means that they were exposed to both information from China, which portrayed the disease as extremely dangerous, and to information in France, which was very reassuring about the disease until March 2020. Similarly, they had to balance the diametrically opposed attitudes of Chinese parents and relatives, who were quick to adopt barrier measures, and French friends and colleagues (often young), who were not worried about the pandemic and did not take any protective measures. As the descendants are much more deeply embedded in the French context than in the Chinese one, these dueling influences are not symmetrical, yet the effect of the Chinese context is not insignificant. This in-between position is well described here by Louise:

In France we talked about the extent and contagiousness of the virus as if it were a simple flu. We said that there was no risk for young people, that it was like a seasonal flu, that we shouldn't give this virus any importance, whereas in China it was like: "You really have to be careful; there are serious consequences; there are serious after-effects even if a young person catches it; it's really serious." It was really two opposing views. So, I was a bit caught between the two, and I didn't know whether I should

believe the Chinese media, knowing what I know about how things work in China and knowing that in France things were underestimated. So, I was a bit torn. I didn't know whether I should really be careful, whether the Chinese media were exaggerating the seriousness of the situation, or whether France was underestimating its seriousness. In France, they said that masks were useless, [so] we continued to go out. Everyone said, "It's OK, it's not very serious; there are no problems for young people; it's just the flu," whereas in China my whole family said, "Don't go out, don't go out, don't go out."

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

This was also true of Amanda, a twenty-three-year-old business school student and bank intern who was born in France:

Actually, I regularly consult French media, but as I'm often in contact with my grandmother [who lives in Cambodia], I often hear things from her reading of Chinese media. And, so, from what I read [in French], I wasn't really shocked or stressed by the disease; but based on what she told me, I became more careful.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Most of the descendants interviewed began to take preventive measures (wearing a mask, avoiding crowded places) in February 2020—less out of fear for their own health than to avoid exposing their parents, who were potentially at risk according to French political and medical authorities.

Amanda started wearing a mask and staying home before the first national lockdown in France because of the influence of her mother and grandmother. Her account illustrates the disconnect in the perception of the risk of Covid-19 between her and her mother and grandmother, who are much closer to the Chinese context and stay informed via Chinese media. It also demonstrates that comments by her family made her change her behavior and adopt protective measures.

Q: You said that you started wearing a mask in early March 2020, but, at the time, there was still a debate about the effectiveness of the mask in France. So, why did you take the initiative to wear a mask?

Amanda: Well, it was to protect myself, because my mother and grandmother were very anxious. So, they ordered masks from China for us to wear. I wore it to reassure them, and I also

wore it because I was aware that I could be an asymptomatic carrier, and, with a mask, I wouldn't infect others if I was infected with the virus without knowing it. So, it was both to protect myself and to protect others. ... Because I'm of Chinese origin, some people gave me funny looks, but I knew that it was important to wear it.

Q: And you also mentioned that you had started staying home beginning in February, and yet, at that time, you were not very worried about the virus.

Amanda: I wasn't worried, but I stopped going out in mid-February at the request of my grandmother and my mother ... and because I experienced incidences of racism; ... there were some instances in which people moved away from me on the bus because I am of Chinese origin. This had never happened to me before—that people moved away from me, leaving a seat between us. At my university, a person of Chinese origin was insulted after having coughed.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

What is particularly interesting about Amanda's account is that she adopted protective measures despite the fact she judged that the danger of the Covid-19 virus for herself was not very high. Preventive measures depended on the relational context in which Amanda was situated. With her family, Amanda was quite vigilant, but with her circle of French friends, she adopted a more "French" attitude. For example, the weekend before the first national lockdown (March 14, 2020), she planned to vacation with her friends in Switzerland, because, she says, "at the time, I was not afraid of the Covid-19 virus for myself at all."

During this first phase of the pandemic, which preceded the first national lockdown in France, this vacillation between vigilance and carelessness displayed in Amanda's interview was shared by other descendants. In the family context, they followed the instructions and advice of their parents at least in part, but, in professional or social contexts, outside the Chinese network, they behaved like their peers or adopted preventive measures that are less visible, such as washing their hands frequently or avoiding public transportation. This was true of Clémence, a twenty-year-old descendant who is a student doing an internship. She describes changes in her preventive measures, depending on the context:

I'm in a younger generation, which cares less about catching the virus [than our parents]. But I don't mind at all making an effort for my parents.

I was doing my internship in Paris in a place where I was in contact with people, and nobody was wearing a mask, so they were not very cautious, and I was aware of that. So, to compensate, when I went home, I was really careful, I did everything I had to do—everything my parents asked me to do.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Descendants adopted protective measures both earlier and to a greater extent than the majority French population, but less quickly and to a lesser extent than their parents or family members who were tightly connected to China. In fact, the adoption of protective measures by the descendants was often instigated by parents, who passed on information from China, were anxious about the spread of the virus, and told them to protect themselves. Parents directly encouraged their children to protect themselves by telling them to be careful and encouraged them indirectly by buying masks, obtaining medicine from China, preparing herbal teas or traditional Chinese medicines, and changing their diet based on dietary advice spread on Chinese media and social media (see also Chapter 4). However, in some cases, descendants considered the anxieties and reactions of their parents excessive. Clémence describes her mother's attitude as follows:

My mother reads all the articles about how to protect herself from the Covid-19 virus, especially on WeChat. And that leads her to strengthen her immune system by participating in sports. So, she does crunches, she does spinning, and a Chinese thing called *guang bo ti cao*, which members of her generation did when they were in primary school, a kind of stretching in the morning, which is very, very exaggerated. She's gone back to that, and in her mind it's clearly to counteract Covid-19.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Clémence feels disconnected from her parents, whom she views as overdoing it, faced with the pandemic and following unscientific guidance obtained from social media. At the same time, as shown in the next section, many migrants' children born in France found that their peers in the majority population were too relaxed about the virus. This led descendants to feel a double disconnect.

### 3.2 *A Double Disconnect*

This in-between position of the descendants, caught between the French and Chinese contexts, produced a singular experience marked by friction both with Chinese parents and relatives and with French friends and colleagues. As shown

above, descendants often felt that the reactions of their parents were excessive, as their parents were vigilant and adopted preventive measures long before the majority French population. Nonetheless, particularly from the beginning of the first national lockdown in France, the descendants were aware of the seriousness of the public health crisis and the dangers posed by the virus. Although excessive, the attitudes of Chinese parents and relatives became more understandable to many descendants, even though they did not completely share those views. However, a significant disconnect remained with the majority French population. This disconnect was already present in the first months of the pandemic, between January and February 2020, when some descendants began to adopt protective measures or, after listening to their parents, became a little more vigilant. Yet, beginning in March 2020, when the Covid-19 conditions in France deteriorated rapidly and the concerns expressed by parents began to seem realistic, differences with French friends and colleagues became glaring and disturbing. Because the public health crisis was worsening, the majority of the descendants began to reproach French people for ignoring the seriousness of the pandemic and for their excessively individualistic and blithe attitude.

Denis, a twenty-one-year-old student who works in his parents' grocery store in Paris, describes the disconnect he felt with the majority population from the moment that the French authorities imposed preventive measures:

I see that in China, things are really strict, but in Paris, nobody respects the preventive measures, nobody cares, and they think that the virus is like a little cough, a little flu, it's nothing. ... When the government started to put up warnings—"Coronavirus Alert," "Respect the Preventive Measures," "Cough into Your Elbow," "Keep 1 Meter Apart"—I saw that nobody respected that, and everybody was embracing one another—even strangers, who are just neighbors. Oh, brother! You kiss each other when there's a fucking virus? It made me angry. Chinese people in France were a bit more suspicious and more careful, ... but everyone else was not.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JULY 2020

Antoine, a twenty-three-year-old student, described his disappointment with the attitude of his friends and classmates as follows: "When I saw my friends saying, 'Oh, I can't wait for the lockdown to be over so I can go and rob H&M,' I was a bit disappointed in them" (interviewed in French in June 2020). Antoine's attitude from the moment that the French authorities-imposed restrictions to slow the spread of the virus, including a national lockdown, is even more relevant when we consider that between January and February 2020, he ignored his mother's warnings about taking precautions.

In the following interview extract, Clémence summarizes this process of gradually becoming aware of the seriousness of the pandemic, of feeling caught between the Chinese and French contexts, and this double disconnect felt with close family, on the one hand, and friends and colleagues, on the other.

Yes, we heard about it much earlier than the others in France. In China, it was already serious in January, [so] we were already starting to hear about it. But the awareness of the seriousness of the disease in particular was completely different. My [French] friends were still laughing about it and taking it lightly, even in February, and we became a somewhat aware of it, two or three months earlier than everyone else. Our family ... stocked up on masks. We prepared ourselves beforehand, in February, I would say. ... But I was also a bit out of step with my parents, because they were in direct contact with people in China. ... With respect to protective measures, my parents really went over the top ..., I didn't go that far, but I did take some precautions. ... For example, in January and February, my mother always opened doors with a handkerchief or with her elbow, whereas nobody else did that. ... But I also felt a bit of a disconnect with all my friends, who are not of Chinese origin and lived their lives normally, with no idea of what was coming. ... My non-Chinese friends and I called each other about every week, and there was one with whom I didn't really agree, especially about Covid-19. It must have been at the end of March or the beginning of April, when he was rather upset about the lockdown in France, the "infringement of personal freedom" aspect, so he said some things that I found ... very French, culturally very French.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

### 3.3 *Nuanced Views and Multiple Positions among Migrants*

In this section, we address the multiple and nuanced positions among the first-generation migrants, based on their age, gender, professional, and social status.

First, many elderly Chinese began to isolate themselves in February 2020 and extended their self-lockdown until the fall of 2020. In other words, their self-isolation preceded and exceeded the national lockdowns (in the spring and in autumn of 2020) imposed by the French government. Most of them avoided leaving home, and when they had to go out, they wore gloves, hats, and protective goggles. They explained their vigilance by their state of health: indeed, most of them suffered from chronic diseases (see also Chapter 6).

Second, several students received the Covid kit distributed by the Chinese embassy to France, which contains capsules of the Chinese drug *lianhua*

*qingwen* (see Chapter 12). One respondent, who had been diagnosed as infected with Covid-19 and had a fever, took this medication instead of Doliprane (acetaminophen) as prescribed by her French doctor. Other students had received another drug from their parents living in China, *yiqi chuwen keli* (similar to *lianhua qingwen*, a Chinese drug known to be effective in treating viral influenza) and took it to self-medicate when they did not feel well or as a precaution after going out.

Third, some interviewees were users of Chinese medicine or other complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) before the Covid-19 pandemic were aware of the necessity of preventive measures earlier than others. They took food supplements (vitamin C, propolis, garlic, etc.) to strengthen their immune system (see also Chapter 4). In the same vein, some respondents engaged in regular exercise to protect themselves from the virus. The respondents who said that they engaged in physical exercise are often those who had already internalized a holistic and pluralistic approach to health or who had a health concern (e.g., a chronic disease) well before the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Louis, an eighty-four-year-old retiree who was a teacher of *qigong* for years, continued to do at least two hours of *qigong* in his yard every day since the spring of 2020. Another respondent, Tan, a fifty-year-old who is an independent contractor or freelancer, uses Chinese medicine and is careful about what she cooks for her family and performs *baduanjin qigong* in her apartment on a daily basis. Two other respondents, who are, respectively, diabetic and overweight, exercised every day during the lockdowns.

Finally, some first-generation migrants live in precarious conditions. Their preventive measures are very different. As demonstrated in Chapter 8, their first consideration during the pandemic was not fear of the virus and infection but fear of hunger, job loss, and economic uncertainty. Diverse solidarity actions were put in place, within ethnic networks, to help these people to survive through food assistance (see Chapter 8), to be taken care of in case of infection and to obtain access to preventive resources (masks, Chinese medicinal infusions, etc.; see also Chapter 5).

In general, when interviewed regarding their preventive measures, migrants commonly linked them to their stress levels, especially during the first stage of the pandemic (January–March 2020), when the French government had not yet announced any measures, whereas the pandemic conditions in China led to severe measures. As Zhe, a skilled migrant living in Nancy, said:

In Nancy, we were in contact with a lot of Chinese people. Many Chinese students from Hubei returned to France after the holidays. I was very, very nervous. In our jobs, my wife and I used to be in constant contact

with Chinese in Nancy. We made a choice, and I persuaded my wife to give up her job. I'm not afraid to say that I was so scared that I didn't even dare to go downstairs. About the end of February, we decided to go into lockdown ourselves. I was laughed at by my friends. ... I now look back and think it was justified, because I saw the terrible news [in China], and a normal human reaction is to protect the family.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

This interview extract reveals the tight links between the stress level self-reported, the media consumption behaviors, and the preventive measures taken. This case is resonant with terms used by other descendants interviewed in their description of the stress level of their parents and relatives: "mentally fragile," "very sensitive," and "very paranoid." In interviews, these descendants associated the "overprotection" of their family with these terms that refer to their mental health (see Chapters 1 and 3).

This general tendency toward a feeling of stress due to the pandemic began to diminish after December 27, 2020, when the vaccination campaign against Covid-19 was launched in France. In the next section, we focus on the vaccination behaviors of the Chinese people living in France who were interviewed.

#### 4 Vaccination: Choices, Hesitation, and Its Effect on Distress

By July 2021, most of the interviewees had been vaccinated, and only a few of them resisted the vaccination campaign, which began at the end of 2020 and accelerated in the spring of 2021. In general, respondents consider vaccination an effective tool for protecting themselves from the effects of Covid-19. The descendants quickly received the vaccines available in the French market. According to interviews, they were driven by the logic of mutual benefit: the more people who get vaccinated, the more quickly that the health crisis can diminish. Some descendants view vaccination a civil responsibility to help society as a whole to end the pandemic.

Although the descendants generally have a positive opinion about vaccination, which is relatively homogeneous, the attitudes among first-generation Chinese migrants are more heterogeneous. First, attitudes evolved over time. In January 2021, many migrants were talking about the Chinese vaccine and the desire to be vaccinated in China if they could go back there or in France if the Chinese embassy could take charge of the vaccination campaign. In fact, they explicitly stated a preference for receiving the vaccine produced in China. In the spring of 2021, these migrants saw that it was impossible to travel to



China, and it was unrealistic to believe the Chinese embassy to France would organize shipments of Chinese vaccines for delivery to overseas Chinese. Moreover, they followed the public debates on the effectiveness of different vaccines. Afterward, their perspective changed and they quickly joined the vaccination campaign in France and received shots of Western vaccines. Most of the migrants interviewed received their first dose of the vaccine before July, even though in May and June 2021 it was difficult to get appointments for vaccination on Doctolib, the French national health-care appointment site.

This general tendency among first-generation migrants was driven by several different positions and rationales. First, some respondents, usually skilled young nonnaturalized migrants, reported mistrust of mRNA technology at the beginning of the French vaccination campaign. This is their reason for preferring the Chinese vaccine, which is based on a traditional technology. However, because Chinese vaccines such as Sinovac were unavailable, these nonnaturalized migrants consented to receiving the vaccine on offer in France in July 2021. This decision about vaccination in France was also driven by the politics of the health pass in France in June 2021.<sup>6</sup> Several interviewees confess that their decision about vaccination in the early summer of 2021 was driven by pragmatism. The creation of the health pass (which became a vaccination pass)<sup>7</sup> in France and other European countries turned into a travel constraint for them. From 1 July 2021, the QR code on the French “health pass” can be read anywhere in Europe, directly in the TousAntiCovid application or in paper format, in French and English. Such a “health pass” became required for traveling freely in summer 2021 within the European Union.<sup>8</sup> At that time, only four vaccines were recognized in France (Pfizer & BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Janssen).<sup>9</sup>

6 The health pass came into force in France on June 9, 2021. It was required for access to various places for everyone older than age 12; <https://www.economie.gouv.fr/tousanticovid-signal-cahier-rappel-numerique/> [in French].

7 From January 24 until March 14, 2022, the health pass in France was replaced by a vaccination pass, however, the health pass remains valid for those between 12 and 15 years old. On March 14, 2022, the vaccination pass was abolished and replaced by the health pass; <https://www.economie.gouv.fr/tousanticovid-signal-cahier-rappel-numerique/> [in French].

8 [https://www.gouvernement.fr/actualite/pass-sanitaire-toutes-les-reponses-a-vos-questions#fr-sidemenu\\_\\_link-9dbaa7cf-e181-470c-9128-07249d4fea12/](https://www.gouvernement.fr/actualite/pass-sanitaire-toutes-les-reponses-a-vos-questions#fr-sidemenu__link-9dbaa7cf-e181-470c-9128-07249d4fea12/) [in French].

9 An updated and full list of the vaccines recognized is available on the website of the French National Agency for the Safety of Medicines (*Agence Nationale de Sécurité des Médicaments*): <https://ansm.sante.fr/dossiers-thematiques/covid-19-vaccins/covid-19-vaccins-autorises/> [in French].

Qin, who was vaccinated in China during a visit there in January and February 2021 regretted her vaccination in China by early summer. Finally, she received a dose of the Pfizer vaccine in France in October 2021.

After my return to France in February 2021, at first, I was so proud of being vaccinated, and I felt more protected than people around me. I never thought that the vaccination campaign would go so fast in France! If I had known, I would never have chosen to get the Chinese vaccine. Now, I am quite trapped: on the one hand, my Chinese vaccine is not recognized in France. Very soon, I will not be able to travel freely; and, on the other hand, I hesitate to get a dose of Pfizer or Moderna because no one has ever tried to get two different vaccines [the Chinese one and a Western one] and two technologies before, [so] I was worried about side effects. I asked doctors in Paris for advice, but they were not particularly well informed about this. So, I preferred to wait a few months between the last injection of the Chinese vaccine and another shot in the future.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2021

Second, after they decided to be vaccinated in France, Chinese people selected from among the Western vaccines available. They researched and compared them, sometimes hesitating before making a choice. For example, some young female nonnaturalized migrants shared their concerns on the potential side effects of the vaccines on fertility. Several Chinese medicine users also questioned the impact of the vaccine on their general health. In general, the interviewees preferred two mRNA vaccines (Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna) rather than two viral vector vaccines (AstraZeneca and Janssen), whose use is restricted to those aged 55 and over. Knowing that the French National Authority for Health recommends that mRNA vaccines be used as the primary and booster vaccines.<sup>10</sup> Among two mRNA vaccines, the persons interviewed preferred the Pfizer vaccine, most commonly because it is produced by a big pharmaceutical firm whereas the Moderna vaccine is produced by a startup company, which causes them to have less confidence in it.

Finally, a few interviewees declined to be vaccinated—for example, Meng, a thirty-one-year-old student living in Lyon. He does not want to be vaccinated because he is afraid of the potential side effects, as he has hypertension due to a chronic disease. At the same time, he is aware that he will encounter problems because of the implementation of the health pass policy in France. Consequently, he uses protective measures and avoids all gatherings.

10 [https://www.has-sante.fr/jcms/p\\_3309581/fr/covid-19-deux-nouvelles-alternatives-aux-vaccins-a-armm](https://www.has-sante.fr/jcms/p_3309581/fr/covid-19-deux-nouvelles-alternatives-aux-vaccins-a-armm) [in French].

In a nutshell, a vaccination is considered a true protective measure by the Chinese population in France and greatly reduces their stress. Some interviewees admit that since being vaccinated, they are less careful about wearing a mask and taking other preventive measures.

## 5 Conclusion

The population of Chinese origin in France, through direct or indirect access to information transmitted by official Chinese media or social networks, received an early warning about the deterioration in the pandemic conditions in China and the dangers of the Covid-19 virus. Therefore, they started to take protective measures earlier by staying home, avoiding public transportation, paying close attention to hygiene, and wearing a mask in public. In the spring of 2020, mask wearing became a source of concern because of the sometimes hostile reactions and racist aggression it evoked. In the weeks before the first national lockdown in France (mid-March 2020), in relation to the deteriorating conditions in France, Chinese people there began to take increasingly radical measures: closing their businesses, not going to work, and self-isolating. At the same time, they noted that the French authorities reacted slowly and unclearly and that the majority population underestimated the danger and did not protect itself. This led to a feeling of being out of step with the living society.

In view of a general discrepancy between the attitudes of Chinese people in France and the attitudes of the majority population, our study also demonstrates the differences in attitudes about the risks associated with the pandemic and the adoption of preventive measure by the Chinese population there. These differences are linked to differential anchoring in French and Chinese society. In particular, the descendants reacted well in advance and more fully than the majority population because of their Chinese background and later and to a lesser extent than migrants because of their French background. This created the feeling of a double disconnect, both within their families and within their social and professional networks outside the Chinese environment. The descendants felt as if their parents' anxiety and some of their preventive measures were excessive and, at the same time, considered their French friends and colleagues overly unconcerned and individualistic. Other differences among the first-generation migrants were based on their age, gender, professional, and social status, with diverse perceptions of risk and performance of various preventive measures.

Over time, the preventive measures taken by Chinese people evolved, especially after vaccination became widely available in France. A generational gap in the motivation for vaccination, the choice of vaccine, and timing of the

injection emerges here as well. A turning point was reached in July–August 2021 after the vaccines became universally available in France. The collective perception of the pandemic in French society changed: in the summer of 2021, a group of Chinese who live in a suburb north of Paris said: “Now we are learning to live with the Covid-19 virus” (see Chapter 5).

This study fills a gap in knowledge about the experiences of people with a migration background in the French context, especially the lack of comparison between the majority French population and minority groups. The many different attitudes toward the Covid-19 pandemic and various preventive methods reveal different portrayals of the disease and its danger. These portrayals are strongly linked to the cultural and political context in which they are drawn and diverge sharply between the Chinese and the French. Their exposure to different information and social representation produced in the two contexts, particularly through media consumption, determined the social construction of the Covid-19 disease and, consequently, risk perception and preventive measures taken by Chinese people in France based on their diverse social relationships.

From this perspective, our study sheds new light on the protection motivation theory (Milne et al., 2000; Rogers, 1975). We show empirically and in detail how this theory works in real life and applies to individuals: why they perceive a threat as severe, why they consider themselves personally susceptible or vulnerable to the condition, why they believe that the recommended protective behavior is effective, and why they consider themselves capable of performing the behavior. In an academic interpretation, some nuances of a given/analyzed group have to be kept in mind. First, not everyone perceives the severity of the pandemic in the same way or at the same time. Second, not everyone sees himself as “vulnerable” or at the same level; it definitely depends on age, work, and housing conditions. Third, not everyone thinks that all preventive measures are “effective” and so people continuously navigate between different available resources (e.g., choice of vaccines). Finally, from the perspective of social inequality, not everyone can take the same preventive measures. For example, it is not possible for migrants whose lives are already precarious to cease going to work or taking public transportation.

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# Stress and Anxiety among the Chinese Population in France during the Covid-19 Pandemic: a Study Examining Societal and Individual Factors

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## Abstract

This chapter examines the effect of a set of factors triggered by Covid-19 in different time frames on the stress and anxiety felt by the Chinese population in France during the pandemic. In the very first phase of the pandemic, between January and the end of February 2020, Chinese migrants had a higher level of stress and anxiety than descendants. From the end of February until mid-March 2020, all the groups studied experienced an increase in anxiety and stress, with a more significant increase among the descendants. A wide gap between the groups is linked to the factors that triggered the stress and anxiety. Among the migrants, the feeling of anxiety is mainly related to the fear of Covid-19 and infection and, to a lesser extent, to experiences with anti-Asian racism. However, among descendants, the feeling of anxiety seems to be mainly related to racist experiences. This gap is largely linked to the different social representations of Covid-19 and the ways in which it was presented by Chinese authorities and media, on the one hand, and French authorities and media, on the other. During the second phase, which authors call “normalization of the Covid-19 pandemic” (beginning in June 2020), the effects of fear of the virus and of racist experiences on stress and anxiety seemed to diminish. But new drivers of anxiety emerged and affected the most precarious populations. Isolation, educational difficulty, difficulty in accessing the job market, and economic uncertainty are some personal factors that contributed the most to the decline in our respondents’ mental health. These difficulties are reinforced by the fact that the outcome of the pandemic remains uncertain. Anxiety is amplified by the barriers that Chinese authorities erected to prevent people from returning to China, and a few interviewees mentioned stress and anxiety related to collective, political, and social life and more broadly to the future.

## Keywords

stress – anxiety – fear – virus – racism – media – mental health – uncertainty – Chinese diaspora in France – Covid-19 pandemic – migrants – descendants

## 1 Introduction

This chapter examines how a set of factors triggered by Covid-19 affects the experiences of stress and anxiety among the Chinese population in France during the pandemic. By employing a quantitative and qualitative approach, we show that these experiences vary across different groups within the population of Chinese origin living in France and through the different periods of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We contend that the Chinese population offers a particular and unique perspective on the Covid-19 pandemic for two main reasons. First, the pandemic began in China. For this reason, people of Chinese origin became aware of the severity of the pandemic and of the measures needed to contain it very early. As early as January 2020, they became concerned about the spread of the virus, and, in many cases, they anticipated the adoption of protective measure more than the general population. Moreover, Chinese immigrants and the population of Chinese origin in France in general are in a position to compare the handling of the pandemic in China with that in their living country and to compare Western and Chinese information sources. The population of Chinese origin living in France witnessed the differences between the strict handling of the pandemic in China and the French (and European) pandemic responses, which they considered inadequate. Awareness of these differences in the handling of the pandemic in France and in China, as well as the differences in the representations of the pandemic between the two countries, can generate stress, anxiety, and fear among individuals.

Second, since the outbreak of the pandemic in China, several studies have analyzed the rise of stigmatization and racism against Asians in general and Chinese in particular (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021; Gao, 2021a, 2021b; Gover et al., 2020; He et al., 2020; Li & Nicholson, 2021; Ma & Zhan, 2020; Roberto et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021; see Chapter 10) in a wide range of countries worldwide. The rise of stigmatization and racism is fueled by the racialization of the pandemic, associating the real or supposed Asian origins of the virus in media and political discourses and also explicitly scapegoating Chinese authorities and Chinese people by some Western political leaders in a context of international economic tensions (Gao, 2021b).

Our research aligns with numerous empirical studies conducted in different national contexts and at different times during the pandemic that expose the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on individual mental health. Huang et al. (2020), Johnson et al. (2021), and Qiu et al. (2020), for example, have demonstrated that increases in anxiety, stress, and depression reflect that mental health and well-being have been severely compromised by the Covid-19 pandemic

(Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Davillas & Jones, 2021). Researchers have also been engaged in efforts to identify high-risk groups through investigations that focus on the relationship between people's mental health and the socioeconomic characteristics, demographic features, and habits of such groups. For example, researchers studied how, during pandemics, demographics, living conditions, lifestyles, media use, physical symptoms, and mental health are associated with a greater psychological impact of the outbreak and higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Wang et al., 2020). Several studies have focused specifically on media consumption and the impact of media use on anxiety and stress reported (Bendau et al., 2021; Neill et al., 2021; Zhao & Zhou, 2021; see also Chapter 1). These studies highlight that higher anxiety levels were linked to higher frequency of internet news use and online health information about Covid-19 (Shabahang et al., 2020).

It has been well established that minority and vulnerable groups tend to be affected more than others by the negative physical (Bajos et al., 2021) and psychological effects of the pandemic (Kuhn et al., 2021), particularly those who are socially isolated and have limited socioeconomic resources. In this regard, these ethnic minorities are hit particularly hard by the pandemic in terms of health and financial outcomes (Soiné et al., 2021). These ethnic disparities (Wang, 2021) could lead to differences in the perception of risk among these groups, which in turn can result in an increase of stress, fear, or frustration (Soiné et al., 2021). Although, as Ming and De Jong (2021) point out, these studies note these correlations, they do not always address the underlying causes that might contribute to the deterioration in an individual's mental health during the pandemic. In other words, these studies do not examine systematically whether and how mental health and well-being are affected by factors that could be triggered by the pandemic, such as people's fear of the virus, loneliness, and social isolation during the lockdowns as well as economic uncertainty.

For minority groups, the rise of stigmatization and racism (see Chapter 10) or a general sense of disconnection with the majority population in the experience of the pandemic must also be considered (Haft & Zhou, 2021; Tessler et al., 2020). Some studies examine the relationship between anti-Asian racism and the deterioration in mental health among Asian populations in the US and Europe. Wu et al. (2021), for example, show that because of a spike in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States, Asians (especially Asian Americans) experienced higher levels of mental disorder than Whites. They also found that Asian Americans and Asian immigrants were about twice as likely as Whites to report having experienced acute Covid-19-related discrimination and that these experiences increased mental disorders for the full sample. A study by Pan et al. (2021) reveals that Asians in the US were more likely to report experiencing



coronavirus stigmatization than respondents categorized by the authors as non-Hispanic Whites and that individuals reporting coronavirus stigma were significantly more likely to exhibit psychological distress. Several studies focus on different groups of people of Chinese origin in the US. Litam and Oh (2021), for example, show that, for Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, racial discrimination was negatively associated with life satisfaction and positively related to depression. They also found that strong ethnic identity moderated the relationship between Covid-19-related discrimination and depression. In a study that focused on Chinese American adolescents and highlighted the utility of person-centered and intersectional approaches in understanding experiences of racial discrimination, Zong et al. (2021) report a correlation between Covid-19-related racial discrimination and anxiety among Chinese American youth. Ma and Miller (2021) look at Chinese overseas students and, through administering an online questionnaire, they show that high levels of anxiety stemmed primarily from discrimination by the media, fear of Covid-19, and mixed and contradictory messages from their social connections. They indicate that Chinese students overseas faced “double bind” in which they receive two or more conflicting messages from people with whom that have a close relationship, significantly increasing their anxiety. Moreover, participants who could not effectively differentiate the opposing and contradictory messages from their social connections felt the greatest stress.

In a study that focuses on Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands, Ming and De Jong (2021) investigate the personal and social antecedents of mental well-being. This study indicates that the fear of Covid-19 not only was related to participants’ psychological state but more broadly to concerns about their financial security, loneliness and isolation, and the feeling of losing time had a significant negative impact on Chinese immigrants’ mental well-being. Finally, the perceived increase in anti-Asian racism strongly contributed to deterioration in the participants’ mental well-being as well as distrust of Dutch Covid-19 information and figures. As shown by Gao (2021a), racism, social disapproval of political criticism, and the feeling of “double unbelonging” defined as a loss of belonging to both the society of origin and the host society, are three coexisting conditions that are detrimental to Chinese migrants’ mental health.

## 2 Our Study: How the Pandemic Affected the Mental Well-Being of the Chinese People in France

We maintain that, in order to examine how the pandemic affected the mental well-being of the Chinese populations living in France, at least two dimensions

must be considered: the societal dimension and the temporal dimension. First, in terms of the societal dimension, we must take into account the particular position of the Chinese population in France and the rise of racism against Asians. Second, we must take into consideration the timing of the Covid-19 pandemic as the health crisis evolved.

For the purposes of our analysis and interest in tracing the evolution of the pandemic in France and, consequently, the experiences of the Chinese population living in France, we distinguish two periods. The first, from January to June 2020, corresponds to when the worldwide outbreak of Covid-19, the collapse of the French health-care system and the implementation of a national lockdown occurred. During this period, in France (as well as in many other countries worldwide), the virus was strongly associated in political and media discourses with China and the Chinese. Furthermore, as many in the population of Chinese origin in France noticed, the handling of the pandemic in France, and the pandemic management in China greatly differed (which many Chinese migrants described as “shocking”). In France, the approach was characterized by downplaying the danger of the virus whereas, in China, the disease was portrayed as extremely dangerous, and the authorities implemented strict control measures. We define this period as one of “discovery and emergency.”

The second period, from June 2020 to the present, is characterized by “normalization” of the pandemic and by the collective and individual measures needed to contain the spread of the virus. In June 2020, at the end of the first lockdown, France and the majority of European countries ended the emergency period and began a period in which people, scientists, and health and political authorities attain to a better understanding of the virus, its dangers, and the protective measures needed to counter it as well as the subsequent waves of variants. At this stage, the pandemic was of global concern, and the virus was no longer associated with the Chinese. We defined this second period as one of “normalization of the Covid-19 pandemic.”

In this study, we examine the effect of different factors triggered by the pandemic, in the two periods, on the mental health of the Chinese population in France. In particular, we examine the impact of fear of the virus, the experience of racism against Asians, the feeling of being out of step with the French population in terms of perception of the danger of the disease, and the effect of financial concerns and worries about future professional or student life, loneliness, and isolation on the experience of stress and anxiety and deterioration in mental well-being. In particular, we examine the differences in the emergence and behavior of these factors in the two periods.

### 3 Data and Methods

To examine the effect of the pandemic on the mental well-being of the Chinese population in France, we used the quantitative and qualitative approaches in different ways in the two periods. For the first period, “the period of discovery and emergency,” we combined quantitative and qualitative data; for the second period, “the period of the normalization of the Covid-19 pandemic,” we relied only on qualitative data.

As mentioned earlier, we used an online questionnaire to study the multiple aspects of daily life experiences among the Chinese population in France during the Covid-19 pandemic from May to December 2020. One section of the online questionnaire examined the evolution of individual experiences with stress and anxiety during a period from the identification of the Covid-19 virus in Wuhan in late December 2019 to the end of the first national lockdown in France in mid-May 2020. It also covers the successive and gradual reopening of schools, public institutions, and non-essential retailers in June and July 2020. We used our online questionnaire to analyze several factors during the first period, such as how fear of the virus, experiences with racism against Asians, and the feeling of being out of step with the French population in terms of perception of the danger of the disease and as the need to adopt protective measures, affected the stress and anxiety felt in the Chinese community in France.

Our interviewees also described the evolution in their feelings of stress and anxiety throughout the pandemic, not just in the first period. These ethnographic interviews enabled us to round out and interpret the results of our quantitative data as well as examine how the feelings of stress and anxiety in the first period changed in the second period. It also allowed us to test a hypothesis about how the factors that led to the feelings of stress and anxiety evolved among the population of Chinese origin in France from the outbreak of the pandemic in China in January 2020 until the end of the first lockdown in June 2020. We then examined how the experience with racism against Asians, fear of the virus, and feelings of discrepancy affected individual levels of stress and anxiety.

In our online questionnaire, we asked our respondents to rate their level of stress and anxiety on a scale of 0 to 10 (where 10 is the highest) across four periods: the first is from early January to late February 2020; the second is from March to March 17 (the beginning of the national lockdown in France); the third period is from March 17 to May 11 (the national lockdown); and the fourth is from May 11 (the end of the national lockdown) until the summer of 2020.

The questionnaire also asked whether, during this entire period, the respondent suffered (1) physical attack, (2) insults, (3) accusations of spreading the

disease, (4) contempt, or (5) deprivation of rights. The responses were scored using a two-point scale (0 = no, 1 = yes). We combined these items to create a scale of experience with subjective racism, ranging from 0 to 5, with higher scores indicating more encounters with racism.

To capture the respondent's fear of the virus and risk perception, we used an indirect measure related to the protection measures adopted by the respondents during the pandemic, asking whether, over the period January to June, the respondent (1) wore a protective mask, (2) went out less, (3) stopped working, (4) stopped going to school (or stopped their child from going to school, or (5) stopped using public transportation. All five items were scored on a two-point scale (0 = no, 1 = yes). As with the scale of experience with subjective racism, we combined these items to create a scale of subjective risk perception ranging from 0 to 5, with higher scores indicating a greater perception of risk; we used this index as an indirect measure of the respondent's fear of the virus. We are aware that further studies would be valuable using direct measures of fear of the disease.

Finally, we posed the following question: "Do you feel out of step with other people in the adoption of measures to protect against infection with Covid-19?" Respondents had three options: (1) No, (2) I don't know, or (3) Yes. We treated this item as a three-point ordinal scale (no = 1, I don't know = 2, yes = 3).

Our analysis consists of two steps. First, taking advantage of the quantitative data, we constructed a linear mixed model to estimate how an individual level of stress and anxiety varies across the four periods and among the three migratory status groups (naturalized migrants, nonnaturalized migrants, and descendants), the two groups by sex, and the six groups by migratory status and sex. Second, we constructed a structural equation model to estimate, first, the effect of the subjective experience of racism, fear of the virus, and the feeling of being out of step on the individual level of stress and anxiety and, second, the effect of the subjective experience of racism and the fear of the virus on the feeling of being out of step, and their indirect effect on the individual level of fear and anxiety through the feeling of being out of step. For the second period (June 2020 to June 2021), we mobilized data from the interviews and the ethnographic observations conducted both in person in the field and online and from media monitoring in Chinese, French, and English.

## 4 The Period of Discovery and Emergency (January–June 2020)

### 4.1 *The Evolution in Stress over Time*

Figure 3.1 shows the individual level of stress and anxiety among descendants, nonnaturalized migrants, and naturalized migrants. Overall, between January

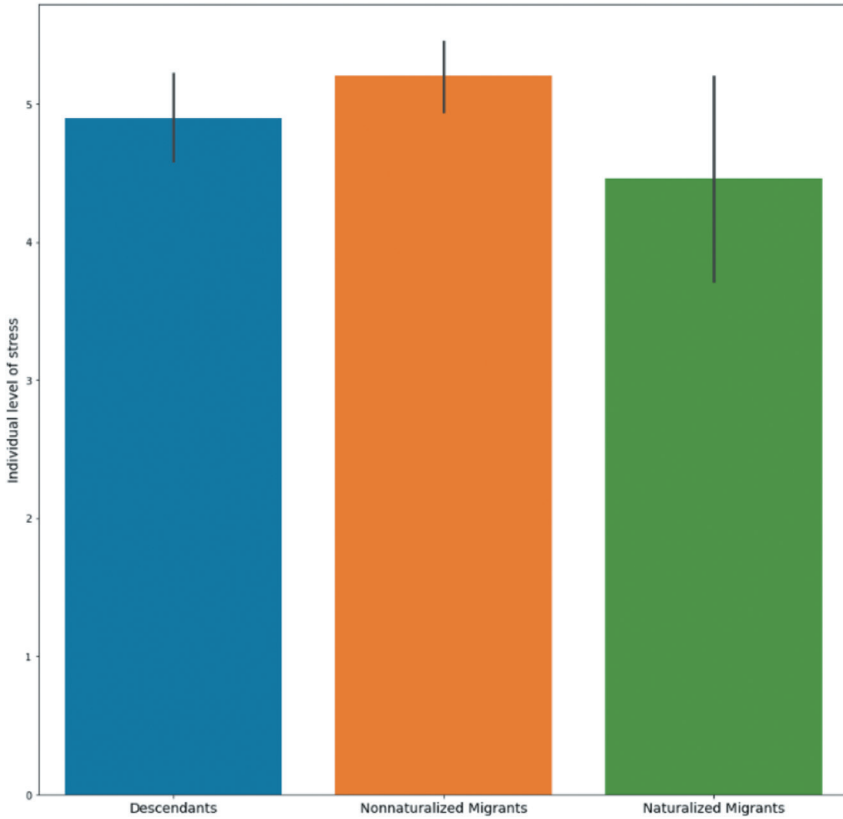


FIGURE 3.1 The overall level of stress between January and June 2020; the mean across the three migratory status groups

and June 2020, descendants had a level of stress and anxiety score of 4.89 (95% CI, 4.74–5.04), nonnaturalized migrants had a score of 5.19 (95% CI, 5.06–5.32), and naturalized migrants had a score of 4.45 (95% CI, 4.08–4.82). Nonnaturalized migrants report feeling more stress and anxiety than descendants and naturalized migrants, but these differences are not statistically significant.

To test our hypothesis that the pandemic negatively affected the mental health of our respondents, we examine the changes in individual levels of stress and anxiety over the four periods. Figure 3.2 shows changes over time for the three groups. In the first period (January–February 2020), nonnaturalized migrants report more stress and anxiety (mean, 4.76; 95% CI, 4.57–4.94) than the descendants (mean, 3.84; 95% CI 3.66–4.02) and naturalized migrants (mean, 3.2; 95% CI, 2.95–3.67), which is the group that experienced the least stress. The difference in stress and anxiety between nonnaturalized migrants and descendants and between nonnaturalized migrants and naturalized migrants is noteworthy: between January and the end of February, nonnaturalized migrants

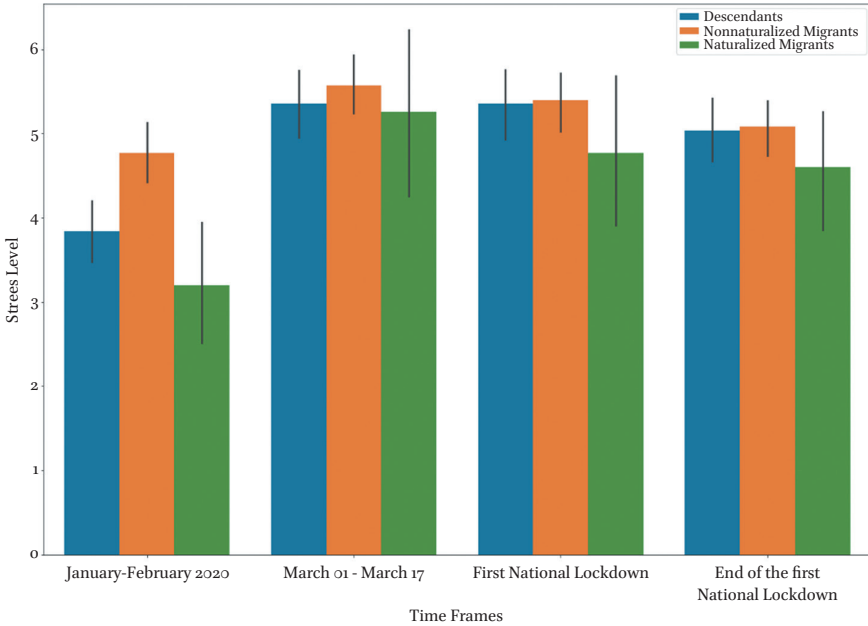


FIGURE 3.2 The evolution of the individual level of stress over the four time frames and the three migratory status groups

are 24 percent more stressed than descendants and 48.7 percent more stressed than naturalized migrants. The mental health of the nonnaturalized migrants seems to be affected by the pandemic earlier than that of the other groups. This is because at that time the Chinese authorities portrayed the disease as serious and imposed very strict control measures, whereas the French authorities declared that the virus did not pose a threat to France.

Indeed, alerted by Chinese authorities and their relatives in China, a large number of nonnaturalized migrants thought that the virus was going to spread in France and found the reaction by the authorities and the population in French inadequate.

We also found that feelings of stress and anxiety increase strongly in all three groups (+16% for nonnaturalized migrants, +39.3% for descendants, and +64% for naturalized migrants) and reached the highest level in the second period (March 1–17, 2020), when the virus was spreading widely in several European countries and some of them (but not yet France) began to impose strict control measures, including local or national lockdowns. Then, in all three groups, the level of anxiety and stress stagnated during the national lockdown and slowly decreased at the end of the lockdown but remained higher than during the period January to February. To examine these trends more closely, we estimate

the effect of the four periods, migratory status, and sex on the individual level of stress and anxiety using a linear mixed model.

Table 3.1 shows the results of our model: the individual level of stress increases strongly in the second period in all three groups and decreases slowly in the third and fourth periods (in relation to the second period, but still increases in relation to the first period). The individual level of stress is significantly higher in the second, third, and fourth periods than in the first. We also found that nonnaturalized migrants report feeling more stressed than descendants, and naturalized migrants report feeling less stressed than descendants; but these effects are not significant.

Finally, a majority of the global variation in the level of stress and anxiety is explained by the individual level; in other words, individuals generate more variation than migratory status and sex.

TABLE 3.1 Mixed model estimations of the effects of multiple factors on stress at the individual level

Predictors	Estimates	95% CI	p
Intercept	4.34	3.30, 5.38	< 0.001
Time frames			
March 1-17	1.18	0.94, 1.43	< 0.001
First national lockdown	1.04	0.79, 1.28	< 0.001
End of the first national lockdown	0.75	0.50, 0.99	< 0.001
Migratory status			
Migrants who are not naturalized	0.17	-1.20, 1.53	0.811
Migrants who are naturalized	-0.64	-2.23, 0.94	0.426
Sex			
Males	0.93	-1.98, 0.12	0.082
Random effects			
$\sigma^2$	2.96		
$\tau$ Individuals	4.47		
$\tau$ Migratory status	0.20		
$\tau$ Sex	0.03		
ICC	0.61		
n. migratory status	3		
n. sex	2		
n. individuals	381		
Observations	1524		
Marginal R-squared/Conditional R-squared	0.04/0.629		

#### 4.2 *How Experiences with Racism, Fear of the Virus, and the Feeling of Being out of Step Affect the Individual Level of Stress and Anxiety*

Following the hypotheses presented in the first part of this chapter, we examined how the subjective racism experience, the fear of the virus and the feeling of being out of step negatively affect the mental well-being of our respondents through the increase of the stress and anxiety. We also examined if the experiences of racism and the fear of the virus indirectly affected stress and anxiety through an increase in the feeling of being out of step. To examine these relationships, we performed a path analysis using a structural equation model (SEM). For each respondent, we retained only one measure of stress and anxiety, the individual mean over the four periods. The model is presented in Figure 3.3, and the main results are in Figure 3.4.

Our model shows that, among the descendants, the main predictor of the individual stress level is the subjective experience of racism (Beta = 0.558, SE = 0.148). The effect on the individual stress level of fear of the virus is positive but not significant.

As with the descendants, among the nonnaturalized migrants, experience with racism significantly increases the individual level of stress (Beta = 0.283, SE = 0.132). However, in contrast to the descendants, among the nonnaturalized migrants, the factor with the largest impact on increasing an individual stress level is fear of the virus (Beta = 0.416, SE = 0.133). We found no significant effects from experience with racism and fear of the virus on the feeling of being out of step and on the personal level of stress through the feeling of being out of step. Finally, among naturalized migrants, none of the variables examined had a significant effect on the individual stress level. Still, experience with racism causes the increase in the level of stress. However, because of the size of the group and of the estimated standard error, we must regard this result with great caution.

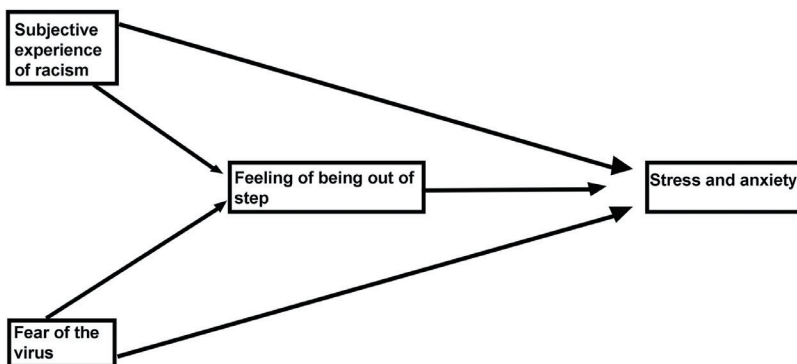


FIGURE 3.3 Path diagram representing the structural equation model  
WU ET AL. (2021)



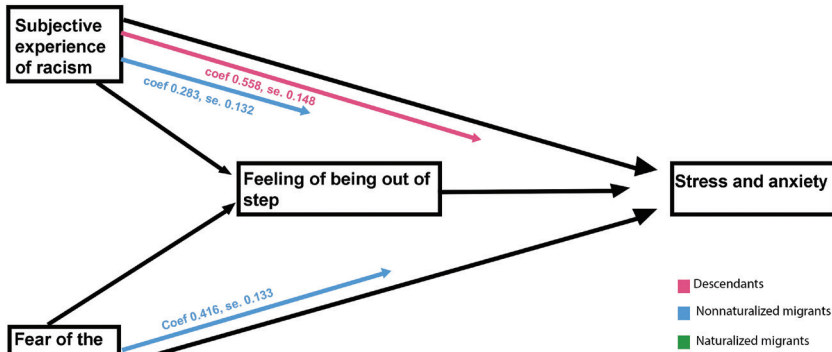


FIGURE 3.4 Path diagram representing the significant effects estimated by the structural equation model

Our quantitative data covering the first period indicate some strong patterns. Concerning the evolution of stress and anxiety over the four periods, we found that nonnaturalized migrants are significantly more stressed during the first period (January–February 2020) and that the level of stress and anxiety greatly increases (though less so than among descendants and naturalized migrants) in the second period. In other words, this was in the weeks leading up to the first national lockdown in France and at a similar level in the three groups, and that, in all three groups, the level of stress stagnates or slowly decreases during and after the first national lockdown but remained significantly higher than in the first period. Among descendants, stress and anxiety are strongly connected with experience with racism. In contrast, among nonnaturalized migrants, experience with racism and fear of the virus both affect the individual level of stress, but fear of the virus has a stronger impact. Among naturalized migrants, experience with racism seems to increase the individual level of stress, yet our estimations remain quite imprecise. We found that fear of the virus has no or little impact on the feeling of anxiety and stress among people born in France and people born outside France but who have lived in France for a long time (naturalized migrants). In the next section, we focus on how our respondents made sense of their feeling of stress during the period between January and June 2020, and, in particular, we examine whether their accounts support the differences we observed in our quantitative data.

#### 4.2.1 Making Sense of the Feeling of Stress and Anxiety

In our interviews, we asked the respondents to talk about their feelings in relation to the changes due to the pandemic. We found that a feeling of stress and anxiety was very common, but it was described in very different ways and associated with different times and different factors. Early on, nonnaturalized

migrants were affected by Covid-19. In fact, since January 2020, they had followed news from China that described the strict measures taken by Chinese authorities to contain the spread of the virus. They followed the details of its dramatic effects on physical health: local lockdowns, mobilization of thousands of doctors and nurses in the Wuhan region, the construction of new hospitals and a media campaign describing the virus as extremely dangerous and recommending the population to take protective measures very quickly. Moreover, among the nonnaturalized migrants, the Covid-19 virus revived painful memories of the SARS pandemic in 2002 and the strict protective measures needed (at the individual and collective level) to counter it. In addition, through exchanges with their families and relatives in China, the nonnaturalized migrants continued to hear about their parents' and friends' concern about the virus. Indeed, beginning in January, nonnaturalized migrants feared the virus and expressed worries about their parents' and friends' physical health in China and the potential spread of the disease to France.

One such nonnaturalized migrant is Zhe, a thirty-six-year-old from Hubei who is a geologist at the University of Nancy. Zhe described his feeling of stress and anxiety between January and March 2020, when the virus was spreading in China and then on a global scale:

To be honest, it was really scary to see those local people [in the Hubei region], many people in panic looking for help, ... and watching the news [on Chinese media] about many families that have lost their loved ones, or the whole family died and so on; it is very sad. A more painful private thing: at that time, my grandfather and my cousin were infected, but luckily they survived, ... they were in the hospital for nearly forty days.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

For Zhe, Chinese official media and Chinese social media played a crucial role in increasing stress and anxiety among nonnaturalized migrants by describing the virus as extremely dangerous to individual health:

Social networks are good tools for information, ... but there is a problem: a lot of information is not verified and leads to panic and misjudgment. This is a personal example: at the end of December 2019, I saw in the news [on social networks] that someone said that SARS was back in Wuhan, and some people were infected. Some doctors, such as Li Wenliang, passed the information to their own small circle. ... When I saw this information, I was very afraid because I had experienced the first wave of SARS. ... My perception is that this new virus is very scary, and, if get

it, you will die. At that time, I saw some domestic reports in the Chinese media in which a normal person suddenly falls to the ground and dies; when I saw these news, I was very nervous because in Nancy we meet with a lot of Chinese people, and, at that time, it was the end of French vacation time, and many students from Hubei were returning to France.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

Zhe's stress and anxiety were clearly triggered by fear of the virus and pushed him to take very strict protective measures, such as asking his wife to stop working and going into self-isolation very early, "around February 29," three weeks before the national lockdown in France. Fear of the virus was fueled by how it was presented in Chinese media and by the understanding in Chinese society of Covid-19 and the measures needed to contain it. Zhe added:

What I want to say is that through scary reports the Chinese media only raise fear, such as the young man who fell to the ground and died. ... I am an example myself, as, at first, I was really afraid even to go out. I was really scared even to go out, touching nothing because I thought that I would get infected—after all, I have a wife and children at home.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

Clearly, for Zhe, there are different cultural representations of the disease across different countries and the Chinese one was particularly based on the "fear" of the virus. In contrast, Zhe found that a more scientific approach was present in the European and US media, with more available data and a description of the virus as less dangerous than that given in the Chinese media. These different representations affected the way in which people experienced the pandemic and, in particular, how their personal level of stress and anxiety was affected by the Covid-19 virus. Zhe described this process in this way:

I kept following the data from the United States, France, and Europe, but I slowly realized that if you look carefully at these data, and the relevant academic papers, the global average rate of mortality is about 0.1 percent, and it may be different for different ages—for example, the mortality rate below the age of fifty may be 0.0 or so, whereas the mortality rate above the age of sixty is about 3 percent or 4 percent. This is why some people say that Covid is just like the flu: of course, I am not saying this to make people relax their vigilance, but ... what I want to say is that when I can look at more comprehensive data and papers, I will gradually calm down. Of course, I think it was necessary to take protective measures, but

with Chinese information, this was done blindly and caused a lot of pressure on my psyche. ... My in-laws in China have not calmed down so far; for example, they know that we have 10,000 to 20,000 people diagnosed a day. They feel as if we are surrounded by the virus everywhere, in a very, fearful state. They have been fearful since January 23, when the lockdown in Wuhan started.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

In the first period of the pandemic, Zhe's level of stress and anxiety was strongly and almost exclusively associated with fear of the virus and its threat to physical health. Zhe linked his fear of the virus to the representation of the disease in Chinese official media and social media, which, since January 2020, have described the virus as extremely dangerous (see Chapter 1), and, according to Zhe, Chinese policies for controlling the spread of the virus were based on "people's fear [of the virus]." The feelings of stress and anxiety among many nonnaturalized migrants in France and many people living in China greatly increased, leading them to be extremely afraid of the virus's potential effects on their physical health.

For the nonnaturalized migrants, an additional source of anxiety was the perception that the French political and health authorities were not taking adequate measures for limiting the spread of the virus. When chatting with their French friends and colleagues, they observed very little concern about the virus and its dangers, which they considered remote. Yan, a nonnaturalized migrant and a student at the University of Montpellier, described her experience before the first national lockdown in France as follows:

At first, I had the impression that the French didn't really care about the virus. When I was in Montpellier, and there was a case, my friend told me to go out, and I was very afraid. However, my French friends told me that it was not a problem for young people, that only the old and weak were infected, and that it did not matter. They also didn't think they should wear a mask.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2020

In this context, some nonnaturalized migrants started to wear masks in public and on public transportation in order to protect themselves. Because of this protective behavior and the strong ethnic inflection about the disease in political and media discourses, some nonnaturalized migrants experienced racist attacks, consisting mostly of insults and accusations of spreading the disease

(Wang et al., 2021). On multiple occasions, these attacks drove some nonnaturalized migrants to engage in self-censorship. Indeed, some nonnaturalized migrants, frightened by the spread of the virus but intimidated by these attacks (which they directly experienced or witnessed), decided not to wear masks in public. As Yan told us:

Before the lockdown, I didn't dare to wear a mask because if you wore one, the other French people would look at you very differently and maybe more directly. They walked around you or yelled, so I didn't dare to [wear a mask]. I saw a few friends wearing them, and they all said they were getting a lot of strange looks.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2020

These attacks heightened the level of anxiety experienced by individual migrants. Indeed, nonnaturalized migrants believed that this context strongly exposed them to racist attacks, which were more frequent and violent than before and had been unimaginable a few months earlier (see Chapter 10). Some nonnaturalized migrants gave up on protecting themselves in public in order to reduce the risk of attack and thus put themselves at higher risk of infection.

These racist attacks were strongly denounced on social media and in the official media. This denunciation raised awareness among the nonnaturalized migrants of racism against Asians in France, particularly among those who had not yet experienced it themselves and therefore were not concerned. We noticed different periods of fear of the virus and experiences with racism. Indeed, fear of the virus began at the beginning of January 2020, before the surge in racist attacks in France began in February, when Covid-19 infections were first reported in France. The racist attacks linked to Covid-19 reached a peak between February and April 2020 and seemed to decrease as the spread of the virus turned into a global pandemic and was less associated with China and Chinese people.

Among nonnaturalized migrants, anxiety was triggered by both the fear of the virus and experience with racism. In the minds of our respondents, these two factors are often intertwined. Anxiety was provoked by a personal feeling of being out of step with French society, and this feeling resulted from the convergence of the fear of the virus and the racism experienced in relation to the pandemic. This experience created the perception of a discrepancy in social norms and expected behavior in China and in France in the context of the pandemic. Moreover, it underlies the impression that social norms and behavior expected in French society to contain the pandemic were insufficient and

consequently put the health of millions of people at risk. Qiaoling, a twenty-five-year-old nonnaturalized migrant and a graduate of Sciences Po, described her experience during the first months of the pandemic, before the national lockdown in France, as follows:

I was very stressed at that time. ... I did not wear a mask [at that time] because other people here find it strange, and I heard people's comments. Also, the pandemic is getting worse in France, and discrimination is felt more than at the beginning: I have never encountered discrimination before, so I am not sure whether what I have experienced is necessarily discrimination. I have a friend who wears a mask at work, and the manager asked him to take it off because it causes panic [between clients and colleagues]. It's very difficult to understand what's going on here: another friend said that someone in the street said that [because] he is Chinese, he should stay away from him.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Another migrant, Dr. Lei, a general practitioner, mentioned her high level of stress and anxiety as a health worker:

Every night when I left my medical practice, I felt exhausted, as if my body had been drained. I don't want to live with this fear all my life. I am less afraid for myself, but if I catch Covid, I'm afraid that I would pass it on to my patients.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

Unlike the skilled migrants discussed above, Chinese working-class migrants, under the influence of Chinese-language media (see Chapter 1), reported their stress and anxiety due to fear of the disease. This is illustrated by the case of Ms. Ma, a seventy-year-old retired cleaner. In an interview conducted in Chinese in June 2020, she stated that her family was very afraid to go out shopping, and, so, they stored a lot of food to avoid leaving the house. After the announcement of the first national lockdown in France, they moved to the countryside. In a housing development located in a suburb north of Paris, where the population is 70 percent Chinese, the vast majority of whom are working class (see Chapter 5), the inhabitants quickly set up a delivery system for fruits and vegetables, as they feared contamination and wanted to avoid going out. For those whose living conditions are more precarious (see Chapter 8), the stress comes not only from fear of illness but also from the loss of financial resources, due to the loss of work. For all these people, racism was not at the center of their

reasoning when they talked about the stresses they feel. Furthermore, they did not report stress in the form of feeling out of step with the French society, because they live largely within Chinese ethnic networks and rarely meet up with members of the majority population in France.

Consistent with our quantitative data, in the first period and, notably, from January 2020 to March 2020, descendants appeared to be stressed very little by the virus. In line with media and government announcements in France, most of them considered Covid-19 a distant danger, found in China. In some cases, the danger might concern their own family or friends in China, but they felt safe in France: The virus could not reach them. Denis, a twenty-one-year-old who works at his parents' grocery store, described his feelings when he first heard about the Covid-19 virus spreading in China when listening to a major French television channel:

Denis: During the transportation strike in France last December [2020], I was at work, I put on BFM [French twenty-four-hour cable news channel] as usual, and they were talking about the new virus in China. I thought it was just some kind of flu, as a lot of people thought at that time [in France] and that it would never reach the borders of France, well, of Europe ... and then it reached ...

Q: So, at the beginning, you didn't really care about Covid-19?

Denis: Yeah, I thought it was on the other side, in China, that it was never going to reach France, that it's a little thing! [laughs] But no, then I woke up one morning, I saw the first case in France, a second case, a third case, a thousand cases! I didn't understand anything!

#### INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JULY 2020

Similarly, Amanda, a twenty-three-year-old descendant who is an insurance executive, described her feelings when she became aware of the reality of Covid-19, during the period January to April 2020:

I regularly consult the French media, but as I am often in contact with my grandmother [who lives in Cambodia], I often see the reactions from the Chinese media. And so, based on my reading, I was not really shocked and anxious about the disease. I lived far away and did not feel much anxiety. But, based on things she said, I was still vigilant because she consults some Chinese media and maybe the cultural and geographic proximity led her to have different opinions from those I obtained from French

media; it was not shocking to me in January and February—it did not seem shocking at all. And then when the first cases occurred in Europe, I would say at the end of January, beginning of February, when I had planned to go to Switzerland, it was the weekend before the lockdown, March 14. I was not afraid of the Covid-19 virus at all. I had not stocked up, and I was really calm about the virus even though there were already many cases in Italy, France, England. ... The fact that I am young, less than twenty-five years old, played a role because the studies and the media at that time showed that it was the elderly who were affected.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

In this first period, the descendants seem to be concerned very little about the virus, primarily due to the geographic distance from China. Second, as Amanda accurately described, when the virus started to spread in Europe, this lack of concern was related to the way in which the disease was portrayed in the media and by health and political authorities in France. As she said, she was very “calm” because the media and health authorities in France described the virus as marginally dangerous and as a threat only to the elderly. She then planned her winter vacation in Switzerland only two days before the national lockdown in France. At the same time, her grandmother was telling her about how Chinese media were describing the disease as dangerous.

Although the descendants seem to be far less concerned than the nonnaturalized migrants about the dangers to their physical health of Covid-19 during the first period of the pandemic, they described the period from mid-February to April as very stressful. Many described the transition from a stage of feeling calm and carefree to one of stress and anxiety. According to Monica, a twenty-three-year-old descendant who is a student, the increase in stress and anxiety among descendants was clearly associated with the spike of acts of racism in France and worldwide against people of Chinese origin that had occurred since February 2020:

So, at the beginning, I didn't feel concerned at all. For me, it was a disease that was really in another country, and it wasn't going to affect us. And over time, when all the stigma about China, the Chinese, etc., began to appear, I started to think: yeah, maybe it concerns us a little more. ... What made me feel really concerned was all the media reporting—for example, Chinese restaurants that had been vandalized or certain Asian restaurants that were completely empty. ... It was a lot of little events reported in the media that made me realize that there was indeed a problem linked to people's perception of the disease and their views of Asia



and Asians. ... When I say “concerned,” I am talking about stigma, racism. ... Sometimes there are looks, maybe it’s only paranoia, but we have the impression that people are giving us bad looks. Sometimes, it is very simple things: for example, if we stand in line to—I don’t know—eat noodles, we hear remarks in the background, such as: “Maybe we shouldn’t eat too much Asian food right now; maybe it’s not the right time.” You say to yourself: that’s tense.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

Camille, a twenty-three-year-old descendant and a student, said that, during this period, her anxiety was related not to the spread of the virus but to the spread of racism against Asians in France:

What scared me the most were the stories I heard about people being spat on in the street and being called “Covid.” That’s what I was afraid of—not catching Covid-19, but getting beaten up in the street. ... So, my anxiety was never linked to the pandemic itself, at least not for my health, as I live alone. But I think that the fact of having been locked up, of having consumed, in spite of myself, so much harmful information and so much hatred—that really increased my anxiety. I know about all this hate, and I fight against racism in general. But it’s mostly the increase in these behaviors and the fact that people were much more comfortable about saying these kinds of things [that increased my anxiety].

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Finally, as shown in Chapter 1, some descendants denounced the ethnic and racist discourses toward people of Chinese origin that appeared in some French media. Camille was extremely frustrated and stressed by the increase in racist discourses in French official media. She said that, to avoid this stress, she had to reduce her media consumption:

Yes, it’s because of some of the comments ..., sometimes I have nightmares about looking at the comments in some publications, and then I start to go crazy. ... and even the official media—it was unbearable. There was nothing informative, ... it made me tired. ... The way in which China was treated by the Western media is very much marked by a certain orientalism, by “othering” in fact, ... of a “formless mass,” in which “they are numerous; it’s their fault,” as if they were people who do not have personalities.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Among the descendants, stress and anxiety are mainly and very clearly associated with the experience of racism (see Chapter 10) and the virus itself does not seem to scare them. The perception of the virus among descendants, as well among nonnaturalized migrants, is linked to the social construction of the disease, namely the way in which the disease has been presented by health and political authorities as well as by the media (see Chapter 1). For example, on February 18, 2020, the minister of solidarity and health announced on the national radio station France Inter: “France is ready because we have an extremely solid health-care system.” On March 6, 2020, French president Emmanuel Macron declared: “Life goes on. There’s no reason to change our habits about going out, except for fragile populations.”

At the same time, much of the national media was occupied by physicians, such as Dr. Didier Raoult, who on February 3, 2020, declared on BFM that “there is no reason to be afraid” and defined the virus as “not so bad.” We are not trying to describe comprehensively how the French and Chinese media presented Covid-19 during this period, only to emphasize the fact that the media and political and health authorities in China and France portrayed the virus very differently. These differences explain, at least in part, the different attitudes toward Covid-19 among descendants and nonnaturalized migrants.

Official media and social media also played a role in the increase in anxiety related to racism among both descendants and nonnaturalized migrants. Since February 2020, official and social media have revealed and strongly denounced racism against Asians in France. As many interviewees expressed, they learned about the expansion in racist activity against people of Asian origin from the official media and social media. On the one hand, the perceived increase in the risk of being attacked in the street and in public exacerbated their stress and anxiety, but, on the other hand, this also enabled the organization of collective reactions and new forms of denunciation (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021).

## 5 Normalization of the Covid-19 Pandemic (June 2020–December 2021)

The first period, which we defined as a time of discovery and emergency (until June 2020), was characterized by two factors. First, the coronavirus was unknown, and scientists did not have any precise information about its severity and infectiousness. Second, the vast majority of countries (including France), which had not experienced an epidemic in many decades, did not have health and safety responses prepared. Moreover, because the outbreak

of Covid-19 became a global pandemic, public policy and health-care services came under great pressure to contain the spread of infection. For these reasons, the political and health-care systems constantly had to adapt to changes in the patterns of viral spread. This first period was also socially marked by the racial inflection in discussions about the virus and by associating the virus with Chinese (or, more broadly, Asian) people, an association that fueled racism against Asians outside Asia.

The scientific community gradually established a consensus about the nature of the virus, its level of danger, and the measures needed to limit and stop its spread. The French population in general and the Chinese population in France in particular have become familiar with Covid-19, and the lockdowns, reduced mobility, and the adoption of daily protective practices developed to deal with it have become normalized. The Chinese population in France, which can access many information sources, can also put the messages conveyed by the Chinese media on the danger of the virus into perspective. As Zhe indicated, more precise knowledge of the disease and access to data enable nonnaturalized migrants in particular to assess the dangers in context. In the same way, Dr. Na, a thirty-five-year-old nonnaturalized migrant, described the change in attitudes by patients of Chinese origin infected with Covid-19, speaking from the hospital where she works:

There was a big difference between this time [October 2020–December 2020] and the first time [March–May 2020]. This time, when patients called, they were very calm, and they said, “Oh, I got a positive test, what should I do?” In contrast, during the first period, people were very worried, and they said, “What should I do? I’m positive! What should I do? What should I do?” And then all of a sudden, it felt as if they were falling into an abyss. But now it seems that everyone is more at peace with themselves. ... The first time, people were still very stressed about this psychological pressure, especially those diagnosed with Covid-19. They don’t know whether the disease is serious, because many people on TV have different opinions, and different experts say different things. In fact, many patients have no idea. Well, this time, we all know that 85 percent or more of patients have mild disease, so they can actually recover on their own. ... The first time, people may have been more psychologically stressed, because they did not know what was going on. So when you have experience, you might feel less psychological pressure, but it is still clear that, on the one hand, they feel less psychological pressure, which is good, but, on the other hand, people might be less vigilant.

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Fear of the virus and contamination in the first period of the pandemic, which (as we have seen) could turn into panic, seems to have diminished in the second period. In addition, the end of the health crisis could be anticipated after the creation and production of vaccines on a global scale. Moreover, because of the spread of the pandemic to a global scale, the virus is decreasingly associated with real or supposed Chinese/Asian people. Thus the racism associated with Covid-19 has abated and occupies less media space than during the first period of the pandemic.

Despite being “normalized,” the pandemic is still ongoing and continues to affect the daily lives and mental health of individuals with new factors that increase stress and anxiety. Among people of Chinese origin in France, those living in precarious conditions were the most affected (see Chapter 8). Students suffered from chaotic schooling conditions, with courses held both in person and online. This was of special concern for nonnaturalized migrant students, who had to reconsider their migratory and professional paths. Indeed, some students believed that online instruction, as well as the loss of contact with teachers and other students, reduced the value of their degrees. In addition, these study conditions, coupled with the economic difficulties at many companies, make it difficult to obtain an internship and enter the workforce. This was particularly frustrating and distressing for students who had made great personal and family investments in their studies in France (see Chapter 7). For example, Tong, who was a twenty-five-year-old master’s-degree candidate at Aix Marseille University, completed his studies during the pandemic and was looking for an internship. He described his anxiety with regard to the future as follows:

I feel some pressure about finding an internship: I would like to do work-study training in Paris next year. ... I’m very anxious about it, mainly because of the uncertainty of life. ... I’m more scared about the future than the virus. At least I’m still young [the virus is less dangerous for young people], but I’m not like French people either, as they go out to see everyone without caring about Covid-19. ... It would be less stressful to find [such a program], at the end of the lockdown [the third national lockdown, between April and May 2021]; it would be a little bit better, but you can’t say that there is no [pressure] at all.

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In addition to stress related to pursuing their studies or starting their professional career, nonnaturalized migrant students also feel anxiety related to solitude. Because of the policies to control the spread of infection imposed by

Chinese authorities, returning to China is extremely complicated. Thus, non-naturalized migrant students could find comfort from family and friends only through online exchanges. The feeling of loneliness and frustration, and thus anxiety resulting from this situation, was amplified in a context in which face-to-face peer relationships in France are severely hampered by lockdowns and measures restricting individual mobility.

Young people who were pursuing a professional career were also highly exposed to the negative effects of the pandemic. They were among those most affected by the economic crisis induced by the pandemic because of the instability of their job conditions. This is true for both descendants and nonnaturalized migrants, as shown by Jim and Mei. Mei was a thirty-year-old nonnaturalized migrant, and during the health crisis, she was looking for an open-ended work contract; finding few options, she began an internship at the Pompidou Center (*Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou*). She also became an entrepreneur in order to initiate her own commercial activity. Her boyfriend, Jim, a thirty-one-year-old descendant born in France, works as a salesperson for a large clothing chain. They described their situation as follows:

Mei: I'm currently doing an internship at the Pompidou Center. I'm a bit depressed because it's telecommuting ... and because I was expecting to find a permanent job in France, not an internship ...

Jim: I work face-to-face, but it's true that we have a lot of protocols to follow, such as wiping our hands with sanitizer gel all the time, taking our temperature every morning etc. ...

Mei: I always work at home, it's depressing. ... In November [2020], I started my internship, ... teleworking from home. There are no exchanges with my colleagues, and everyone is teleworking. I don't talk to people ..., I don't know anyone, no one at all. ... [What stresses me] is more the uncertainty [from the fact that] we don't know when this pandemic is going to end; besides, it's rare to find a permanent job at the moment.

Jim: Frankly, the economy is screwed up. ... [At my job], we don't know how we're going to solve this problem. ... It's going to be impossible for us, as we have goals to meet every month ... and economically it's a catastrophe. ...

Mei: In the future, I would like to find an interesting job in cultural activity, but I cannot continue at the Pompidou Center after my internship. I have already [formed an individual company], because, on account of Covid-19, I cannot find any good jobs. ... I have just been rejected by the Palace of Versailles, so I am a little

disappointed. It's a bit complicated because, during the crisis, they don't want to give me a permanent contract.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

For both nonnaturalized migrants and descendants, the stress and anxiety described by our respondents during the period when the Covid-19 pandemic became normalized are less and less related to fear of the disease and experiences with racism. Instead, the people interviewed described their stress and anxiety as increasingly associated with the medium and long-term impacts of the pandemic on their educational, professional, and social lives. By profoundly affecting student life and professional careers, the pandemic forced our respondents to reconsider and reformulate their trajectories: the plans made before the pandemic and in which our respondents had invested their resources and energy were severely disrupted. In addition, isolation and the loss of social ties reinforced stress and anxiety linked to difficulties in school and work.

In that context, the experience of nonnaturalized migrants is characterized by a feeling of isolation that is further reinforced by the fact that travelling to China involves many barriers (see also Chapter 6). Hence, the need to reconsider “pre-pandemic” plans and social isolation only add to the difficulties and constraints of daily life and thereby the anxiety from their inability to return home and to see family and friends. Consequently, these people are doubly hindered. Their plans in France are slowed down or hampered, yet they cannot envisage returning to China. In fact, returning to China under these circumstances might mean definitively abandoning the plans begun in France that were not yet completed. So, they find themselves in a precarious situation economically, socially, and emotionally.

Beyond the dimensions directly related to personal life (studies, work, travel constraints, etc.) that can generate stress among the respondents, some interviewees—often those who are the most reflective—mention stress and anxiety related to collective, political, and social life, that is, to the future.

Nicolas (descendant, student at a *grand école* for engineers): I see the world as more uncertain than ever. I am afraid of the rise in nationalism in France, as we see in the US, as well as in China.<sup>1</sup>

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1 *grandes écoles* (elite French institutions) are somewhat separate from the national education system and recruits its students through a competitive examination).

Mr. Bao (retired businessman, nonnaturalized migrant): I am retired, but I am still helping my young daughter, who has taken over the family business. We live in the suburbs, in a house with a large backyard, where for years I have been keeping bees. My life during the pandemic has been rather quiet. My only concerns are linked to the geopolitical stakes between China and France and, more broadly, between China and Western countries.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

## 6 Conclusion

In our study, we examine how the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health of people of Chinese origin in France. In particular, we study the effects of the pandemic on personal feelings of anxiety and stress in different periods and among different groups. We show that during the first period of the pandemic, specifically between January and the end of February 2020, nonnaturalized migrants had a higher level of stress and anxiety than descendants. Indeed, in January 2020, the nonnaturalized migrants were extremely anxious about the evolution of the disease in China. We also observed an increase in the feelings of anxiety and stress in all groups from the end of February until mid-March 2020, with a more significant increase among the descendants. This is because many of them did not expect the epidemic to spread worldwide and felt safe in France. In contrast, when public health began to sharply deteriorate in France, their stress level rapidly increased, reaching the same level as that of the nonnaturalized migrants.

We also found that, among all the groups studied, the level of stress and anxiety remained steady and then decreased slightly during and after the end of the first national lockdown but still remained higher than in the January–February 2020 period. An important difference between the groups is linked to the factors that triggered the feelings of stress and anxiety. Among nonnaturalized migrants, the feeling of anxiety is linked mainly to fear of Covid-19 and infection and, to a lesser extent, to experiences with racism against Asians, but among descendants, the feeling of anxiety seems to be related mainly to experiences with racism. This differential impact of fear of the virus between nonnaturalized migrants and descendants seems to be related to a difference in their perception of the danger from the virus. Furthermore, this difference is linked in particular to the way in which Covid-19 was portrayed by Chinese authorities and media, on the one hand, and French authorities and media, on the other.

During the second period, “normalization of the Covid-19 pandemic” (since June 2020), the effects on stress and anxiety of fear of the virus and of experiences with racism seemed to diminish. However, new factors creating anxiety emerged and affect the most precarious populations in particular. Isolation, difficulties with their education, problems in getting a job, and economic uncertainty seem to be the personal factors that contributed the most to the decline in our respondents’ mental well-being. These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that the end of the pandemic remains extremely uncertain. Anxiety is further amplified by the difficulty in returning to China because of barriers erected by the Chinese authorities, and a few interviewees mention the stress and anxiety related to collective, political, and social life, looking to the future.

In a nutshell, this study contributes to the literature describing the impact of the pandemic on the psychological well-being of Chinese people in France, offering an empirical demonstration of how human psychology and well-being are profoundly embedded in social and political issues.

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# Between Safety and Health: How the Pandemic Reshaped Food Behaviors among Chinese People in France

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## Abstract

This chapter studies the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a range of food practices (home cooking and eating out) among Chinese people in France since 2020. The food behaviors of the Chinese population were reconfigured based on two different but overlapping rationales: avoiding infection with the virus and staying healthy in general. The desire to avoid infection led to changes in the food practices of Chinese people, such as bulk purchases and shopping for food online. Using food as a part of staying healthy is consistent with the principles of Chinese medicine, so among interviewees who were already users of Chinese medicine, this behavior thus represented some continuity. A clear difference emerged between first-generation Chinese migrants and descendants born in France with respect to home cooking and eating out. In general, Chinese migrants were more vigilant about their potential risk of infection at different stages of food preparation and were more capable of following dietary advice from China to support their health. During the pandemic, their ordinary food practices demonstrate the close links between the perception of risk, the representations of health and illness, and media consumption behaviors. This chapter shows that food norms are constantly appropriated and reappropriated by individuals with different social backgrounds. The respondents found various ways to adapt their diet during the pandemic, between continuity and change with their original eating habits. In this sense, this chapter illustrates how two interlaced rationales (preventing infection and staying healthy) are shaped and operate at the individual level. Moreover, the changes in their routines are strongly driven by digital tools, which play an increasing role in the democratization of new knowledge about food during the pandemic and easily connect customers and food providers. From the perspective of the providers, the pandemic led to a profound change in food markets, other than catering and restaurants. This trend was marked by accelerated digitization. Even before the pandemic, takeout meals were already popular in Asia, and some Chinese entrepreneurs in France had started to create online food ordering platforms. In this sense, in France, Chinese

restaurateurs might have been more prepared than others in the digital transition of their business.

## Keywords

food behaviors – home cooking – eating out – safety – health – risk of infection – Chinese medicine – representation of health and illness – media consumption – digital tools – takeout – restaurateurs – Chinese entrepreneurs – business – Chinese diaspora in France – Covid-19 pandemic – migrants – descendants

## 1 Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, food behaviors changed all over the world because of reconfiguration in the global food supply chain, restaurant closures especially during lockdowns, and media reporting on food safety. Numerous quantitative studies have examined food practices in the era of Covid-19. A mixed-method longitudinal study on consumer behavior conducted in the United States (Thomas & Feng, 2021) describes some food safety measures used to “kill” the virus, such as using soap and even vinegar to wash the outside of products. The authors outline several social determinants (gender, income, education, and age) that might have influenced changes in food practices during the pandemic, though they cannot forecast the persistence of these changes after it ends. Murphy et al. (2020) conducted an online cross-continental comparison survey in May and June 2020 with 2,360 adults in Ireland, Great Britain, the United States, and New Zealand. They highlight some food practices such as increases in the consumption of fruits and vegetables and buying in bulk. Around the world, buying more food than usual seems to be common. Looking at Spain, Vidal-Mones et al. (2021) show that before the lockdown, bulk buying was usually due to fear or anxiety.

In addition to research focused on behaviors related to food safety, another strand of literature analyzes food behavior based on health considerations, in other words, healthy eating during the pandemic. For example, Yang et al. (2020) review twenty functional edible plants with immunostimulatory<sup>1</sup> and antiviral properties, including licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra* L.), garlic (*Allium*

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1 The term refers to a treatment that stimulates or dampens the body's immune system responses (“modulation”).

sativum L.), tea (*Camellia sinensis* [L.] Kuntze), ginger (*Zingiber officinale* Roscoe), turmeric (*Curcuma longa* L.), pomegranates (*Punica granatum* L.), and black pepper (*Piper nigrum* L.). They confirm that such functional edible plants might not only enhance the immune system and cure respiratory tract infections but also greatly affect the overall health of the general public. They suggest that the inclusion of these easily accessible plants in the daily diet could help to strengthen the immune system, reduce the risk of infection with Covid-19, and help someone recover more rapidly from SARS-CoV-2 after infection. In China, a quantitative survey by Zhao et al. (2020) emphasizes the consumption of certain foods or nutritional supplements to cope with Covid-19, including vitamin C, probiotics, other dietary supplements, alcohol, and vinegar. They also discuss the widespread adoption of online ordering and delivery services. Another study carried out in China describes the different perceptions of food health and food risk among the Chinese (Xie et al., 2020). According to Xie et al., food beliefs are more stable among older generations than younger generations.

Using both qualitative and quantitative data, this chapter examines how the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped the food behaviors of Chinese people in different migratory generations who live in France, in term of the main themes of food safety and food as means of health maintenance. We study the continuities and discontinuities in the daily food behaviors among people of Chinese origins in France caused by the health crisis. Studying two food practices—home cooking and eating out—in particular, we examine how these people assess food in the new pandemic context and alter their daily food behavior in order to cope with the health crisis.

## 2 Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts

Food behaviors have long been a topic of interest in the social sciences, because of their close connection to issues such as everyday life practices, identity, social norms, and health. Various studies have highlighted the multiplicity of food practices in the context of international migration (Crenn, 2006; Hassoun, 1997; Raulin, 2000). In particular, scholars have examined the evolution of food practices among migrants and highlighted the “continuities” and “discontinuities” (Crenn et al., 2010): migrants have retained their dietary habits shaped in their country of origin as well as integrating the food habits in their host society (Augustin-Jean, 1995). Dinh (1997) studies the food culture of people of Asian origin who emigrated to France in the 1980s. Dinh highlights the main dietary characteristics of different national groups within the

Asian diaspora and argues that each group creates an emerging culinary style through a mixture of eating practices inherited from their national traditions and eating habits in French society. Liu (2018) studies the food practices of Chinese students in Lyon and states that most of them learned to cook at home in France, and they tried as much as possible to keep the dishes with which they were familiar from their time in China, sometimes using local ingredients.

The reconfiguration of food behaviors is particularly intensive at certain moments in a person's life cycle (pregnancy, end of life, etc.): for example, during their post-partum period, female Chinese migrants pay more attention to their diet as indicated by Chinese medicine (Wang, 2022). Other papers focus on the intergenerational transmission of dietary norms and food practices among migrant families and emphasize their embeddedness in the identification and identity building of children of migrants (Alfonso, 2012; Bronnikova & Emanovskaya, 2010).

Although the pandemic affected every dimension of the people's domestic lives, few studies have examined how the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped daily food behaviors among Chinese living overseas. This chapter fills this gap and highlights the continuities and discontinuities in the food behaviors of Chinese people in France, who navigate between the logic of food safety and dietary logic (food as health maintenance). To do so, we borrow two key theoretical concepts: "food practices" defined by Cardon (2010) and "food literacy" proposed by Vidgen and Gallegos (2014).

Cardon (2010) defines food practices as all daily activities related to food: procurement (place, frequency, choice of products), storage (place, quantity, type of products), culinary preparation (ways of cooking, type of dishes prepared), consumption (place of meals, frequencies, meal structure). According to Cardon, food practices not only are the observable consumption behaviors of products available in the market but also are deeply related to the individual and collective representations of foods and products. Following Cardon's definition of food practices, we examine how eating behaviors among Chinese people in France during the pandemic are driven by emerging knowledge on food and health maintenance (related to nutrition, sociocultural characteristics, and their potential health-related functions) generated in China and around the world.

In a study about everyday practicalities associated with healthy eating, Vidgen and Gallegos (2014: 54) redefine the term "food literacy" as "the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and strengthen dietary resilience over time." "Food literacy" is "composed of a collection of inter-related knowledge, skills and behaviors" in four main domains: planning and management,

selection, preparation, and eating. The notion of “food literacy” as applied to the Covid-19 pandemic context enables us to study the emergence of a new food regime. What new food knowledge emerged during the pandemic? How is this new knowledge circulated around the world? With respect to healthy eating related to Chinese medicine or Chinese food culture, how does the Chinese diaspora in France develop skills and food behaviors related to this new food knowledge for the purpose of self-protection?

By applying these two key concepts to an analysis of food behaviors among the Chinese population in France during the pandemic, we show that the reconfiguration of food practices during the health crisis is deeply affected by the logic of food security and dietary logic. Our analysis is twofold. First, we examine behaviors related to home cooking in three steps inspired by the concept of “food literacy” (food planning and management, food selection, food preparation). Second, we study practices of eating out during a period of social turmoil, such as the first few months of the pandemic. We show that home cooking and eating out do not use the same knowledge and skills and do not always reflect the same logic. Moreover, social differentials in both food practices emerge among the Chinese people in France, based on their migratory status and their social categories.

### 3 Home Cooking: Intertwining Food Security Logic and Dietary Logic

In April 2020, the Chinese embassy in France held an online event for Chinese students and other Chinese nationals in France in order to answer questions about the pandemic and personal prevention.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Zhang Wenhong, a key person in the fight against the pandemic at the national level in China, was invited to speak and recommended that they consume more sources of protein—in particular, meat, eggs, and milk—and vitamins not only as a preventive measure to avoid infection but also as a measure to help a person recover in case of illness.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the pandemic, all the food recommendations revolved around the idea of reinforcing the immunity system, became a new social norm developed in China that has spread transnationally among the Chinese diasporas. As shown in the following sections, the food knowledge and new food practices that emerged in China early in the pandemic have been adopted by Chinese people in France. In addition to this concept of maintaining health through

2 <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/VieSociale/n3/2020/0402/c31360-9675516.html>.

3 See, e.g., <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/343274849/>.



food observed in our fieldwork, other self-reported adaptations in behaviors related to home cooking have been made with the goal of reducing the risk of infection with Covid-19. Many respondents perceived the risk of infection as linked to both the food/products consumed and the ways in which the food is purchased. In this view, food itself can be a carrier of the Covid-19 virus, and infection can spread in the places where food is bought (markets, supermarkets, etc.) and in the way that it is purchased (e.g., on public transportation).

### 3.1 *Food Planning and Management*

Some interviewees modified their food shopping habits in order to reduce their trips outside the home and the risk of infection. In some chapters in this book (see Chapters 1 and 2), we show that beginning in January 2020, first-generation Chinese migrants anticipated the arrival of the pandemic in France at a very early stage and took preventive measures very quickly because of the tight links with China, especially in terms of media consumption and social relationships. Because they were aware of the danger of the disease, first-generation migrants changed their food shopping routines following the security logic. One of the major changes is engaging in bulk purchases.

Zhe is a thirty-six-year-old newcomer who worked as a geologist at the University of Nancy. In January 2020, he learned about the seriousness of the situation in Wuhan through Chinese media and accounts by his relatives in China. He was extremely frightened by the arrival of the virus in France and the potential risk of infection. With his family, he therefore decided to take protective measures very early on and to put himself in quarantine by reducing their non-essential outings: this led him to plan his food purchases in advance, to buy large quantities of products, and to store them at home. He describes this period:

We didn't deliberately stockpile masks, hydro-alcoholic gel, or anything, but we bought a lot of food for our early quarantine in late February 2020. I am the head of the family, I have to have at least three months of rations, and I am a father, I told myself.

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This massive rush and hoarding caused an initial and temporary shortage at Chinese or Asian supermarkets, confirmed by Mr. Xu, the owner of a Chinese restaurant in Paris, in an interview conducted in July 2020. In addition to bulk purchases, the adoption of protective measures while food shopping is also widespread among the interviewees. During the first national lockdown (spring 2020), Qin, a twenty-six-year-old female student, shopped for food every three

weeks, during which she wore protective glasses and two face masks. Bing, a thirty-year-old Ph.D. student, developed a strategy in which he stocked up on Chinese cooking sauces and shopped regularly for fresh fruits and vegetables, every two days. Other respondents used online ordering and delivery services offered by supermarkets and wore particular clothing (e.g., a raincoat) when shopping and going out.

Moreover, the social network WeChat played an important role in the spread of information on planning food shopping. Indeed, since the Covid-19 pandemic, WeChat groups have become the place to exchange information on the pandemic as well as on the protective measures to adopt, including information on supplies of food items at the supermarkets in neighborhoods and municipalities with a high concentration of Chinese inhabitants. Discussions in these groups often included information on where to shop, in particular, where to buy staples such as rice, noodles, soy sauce, or spices. The main criterion used by Chinese migrants in choosing the best places to shop can be summarized by a saying on WeChat: “less crowded, more quantity,” meaning that, first, shops that are not very busy but, second, shops that have large quantities of products, enabling shoppers to stock up on items in large quantities. These attitudes and behaviors marked the food practices of people of Chinese origin early in the pandemic, from January to May 2020.

### 3.2 *Food Selection*

As mentioned above, the Chinese medical authorities highly recommended the purchase of protein-rich foods and vitamins. This food knowledge and these practices spread transnationally and were adopted by Chinese people in France. The respondents, especially the first-generation migrants, seemed to follow these recommendations, though they do so without being completely persuaded about their effectiveness. But they believed that, even if these recommendations did not do any good for one’s health, they were not harmful either and thus were worth a try. Therefore, some foods were particularly sought after. Several respondents stated that they pay close attention to the vitamin and protein content of the foods that they consume.

A Chinese student living in Marseille makes scrambled eggs with tomatoes every day. According to him, this dish provides a rich source of vitamins and protein that can help prevent infection and reduce its harmful effects if he did become infected. A mixed couple—Amélie, a thirty-five-year-old French woman, and Tengfei, a thirty-six-year-old Chinese migrant—also mentioned the matter of vitamins. In her interview, Amélie stated:

It’s true that we ate more at home, and we ate more fruits and vegetables. My spouse overdosed on oranges, too, thinking that it would protect

him. I think he had a little psychosis about oranges: he had to eat lots of oranges, so we bought a lot of oranges [laughs]. I didn't [eat them] because I don't like them.

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Along the same lines, Dr. Lei, a forty-year-old Chinese doctor working in France, adjusted the diet of her children in order to protect them during the pandemic:

To maintain our well-being, we have a daily diet rich in vitamins, fruits, and vegetables, and sometimes we also take dietary supplements, such as vitamin D, which is highly recommended by everyone in France. ... Our diet also prioritizes fruit over a chocolate dessert, so my children no longer have their chocolate dessert and only have fruit.

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Many Chinese respondents also said they paid particular attention to protein intake. A fifty-year-old Chinese businessman in Marseille told us during an interview:

We eat good protein—that's what they all say [on WeChat]. [They say to] throw away the egg yolk if you are infected with coronavirus, then steam the egg white and eat it with lemon juice, usually, in severe cases, four days; if not severe, two days to cure it. ... This is the recipe suggested by our association president following the advice of a doctor. Many people eat this way to recover.

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Other interviewees who have been infected or were at high risk stated that they had consumed large quantities of eggs. For example, Qin, mentioned earlier, found out that she had been exposed in November 2020, she sought advice from Covid-19 patients in China on WeChat and on Little Red Book (Chinese social networks and media) and followed some recommended recipes. Every day, she ate consumed two eggs, a bit of meat, and milk. In terms of vitamin intake, she ate at least two different kinds of fruit every morning, especially oranges, and had some ginger herbal tea with honey. In addition, she bought some vitamins at a pharmacy and took them as a daily supplement.

Interestingly, some respondents satisfied their protein intake with local French products. For example, Bing, mentioned earlier, decided to eat a variety of French cheese every morning: Reblochon, Chèvre, Camembert, and so on. And in order to add milk to his diet at the beginning of the first national lockdown in France, he changed his routine from black coffee to latte.

During our fieldwork, we observed that the Chinese people in France generally tend to pay great attention to what they eat. This dietary logic—eating to maintain good health—is rooted in Chinese medical thinking going back thousands of years, so it was already integrated into the everyday life of the respondents who follow and use Chinese medicine and therefore long predated the Covid-19 pandemic (Wang, 2022).

In this sense, there is social differentiation in terms of changes in food practices. Those whose belief in and use of Chinese medicine preceded the pandemic maintained largely the same diet. For example, an elderly interviewee who usually relies on Chinese medicine, being aware of the health benefits of garlic, consumed a double dose of it during the pandemic. And among those who were not followers of Chinese medicine, Covid-19 significantly reshaped their food habits, as during the pandemic they learned some dietary healing methods through social media, such as Weibo or WeChat, and then applied them in their daily lives. The migratory generational difference partly explains the various degrees of familiarity with Chinese medicine, as part of their socialization process. Indeed, for many Chinese, the consumption of medicinal herbal tea became a part of their daily routine. Often, the first-generation migrants, who are the parents, are the drivers of the preparation of herbal tea, and their descendants drink it, following their parents' advice.

### 3.3 *Food Preparation*

Finally, the pandemic prompted some respondents to change their methods of preparing purchased food. Food preparation begins with how food is stored at home. After returning home with their purchases, many respondents leave vegetables or other purchased foods in a particular place for many hours or even days. They believe that this practice reduces the risk that the virus could survive on the food. We also found that many interviewees, especially first-generation migrants, cleaned food more carefully because they were afraid that they could be infected by lingering virus on it. Qin used sanitizing gel to disinfect the packaging of purchased food. Others only ate fully cooked dishes. Yang, a thirty-nine-year-old naturalized migrant who worked at a French university, said: "We preferred to reheat even fresh bread in the oven before eating it." Other respondents declared that they consumed less or no raw food, such as raw fish or salad. Indeed, products such as raw fish and salad have been removed from the shopping lists of some Chinese because of reports in Chinese media about infections with Covid-19 spread by packaged food through cold chain transport in temperatures that are not low enough to kill viruses.<sup>4</sup>

4 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-08/19/c\\_1126388351.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-08/19/c_1126388351.htm).

The pandemic reshaped home food practices among Chinese people in France, from planning/management to selection and preparation. As early as February 2020, many respondents began to shop in bulk and stockpile food in order to reduce their shopping trips and engage in self-quarantine. In addition, they reported an increase in the consumption of vitamins and protein, on the one hand, and of herbal preparations derived from or inspired by Chinese medicine, on the other hand. Moreover, new food storage methods were introduced to avoid bringing the virus home, and certain kinds of food preparation were greatly modified, such as reducing the consumption of uncooked dishes.

Three main points deserved to be highlighted. First, these changes in domestic food practices are driven by the twin logic of preventing infection with Covid-19 and staying healthy overall. Indeed, the goal of these practices is both to reduce any possible exposure to the virus and to strengthen people's physical condition, in particular their immunity system, in order to withstand an infection if it happens.

Second, these changes in home cooking and eating habits vary among groups of Chinese people in France. Some Chinese migrants maintained their food routines based on their previous incorporation of Chinese medicine norms, knowledge, and practices. Indeed, their food practices were driven by the dietary logic long before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, others changed their food behaviors to be more diet oriented than before. In general, all respondents to different degrees adopted the security logic and encountered more or less discontinuity in terms of food planning and management; the discontinuity was driven by the intention to trips outside the home and therefore tells us something about the socially differentiated way in which first-generation migrants and descendants portray the disease (see also Chapter 2). The migrants interviewed describe the Covid-19 virus as extremely contagious and dangerous, requiring a strict reduction in trips outside the home and modification of people's diets. But the descendants, who often still live with their parents, barely change their eating habits. The few changes made in their diet were generally induced by their parents. The descendants passively follow some advice by their parents or adapt without much confidence in the new food practices set up in their home.

Finally, Chinese social networks and media play a decisive role in representations of the disease and the measures needed to counter it among migrants (see Introduction and Chapter 1). As previously demonstrated, many changes in home cooking practices are due to exchanges and information circulating among WeChat or Weibo groups, following the recommendation made by Chinese political and health authorities and medical experts. Therefore, they offer a relevant example of the transnational circulation of recipes from China to

France and of the glocalization of food knowledge and practices at the time of Covid-19 pandemic.

In the next section, we examine the effect of the pandemic on the practice of eating out by the Chinese population in France. Using quantitative data collected as part of the MigraChiCovid research (see the section in the Introduction on methodology), we show the continuities and discontinuities in eating out across two subgroups—the descendants and the migrants (whether naturalized or not)—and the links between eating out and portrayals of Covid-19.

#### 4 Eating out: the Predominance of the Safety Logic and the Inevitable Tendency toward Digitization

##### 4.1 *Reductions in Eating out Following the Safety Logic*

In the questionnaire, we ask respondents how often they went out to eat at Asian restaurants before the Covid-19 pandemic and how this changed during the pandemic. Figure 4.1 shows that the frequency with which various immigrant groups dined at Asian restaurants varied before the pandemic. The largest share of Chinese migrants (31.5%) reported that before the health crisis they never or almost never went to Asian restaurants, and a small share (11.7% reported that they went there regularly). However, nearly a quarter (23%) of the descendants said that before the pandemic they went to Asian restaurants more than five times a month, and a small share of the descendants (13.9%) reported that before the health crisis they never or almost never went to Asian restaurants. In general, the descendants were the subgroup that ate out at Asian restaurants more than first-generation migrants. This is certainly related to their age, among other things: eating out as a form of sociability among peers.

Figure 4.2 illustrates the evolution in eating out at Asian restaurants after the outbreak of the pandemic (January to mid-March 2020). The frequency of consumption at Asian restaurants by Chinese with different immigration statuses changed from the time that they learned about the pandemic in China until the first national lockdown in France, when all restaurants were asked to close. A majority of the Chinese migrants declared that they went to Asian restaurants less often than before the Covid-19 pandemic: 59.2 percent. The descendants born in France, based on self-reporting, as a group ate at Asian restaurants as much as before and reduced doing so the least after the pandemic began. In the first stage of the pandemic, descendants still considered Covid-19 an epidemic in a distant country that would not affect France. By

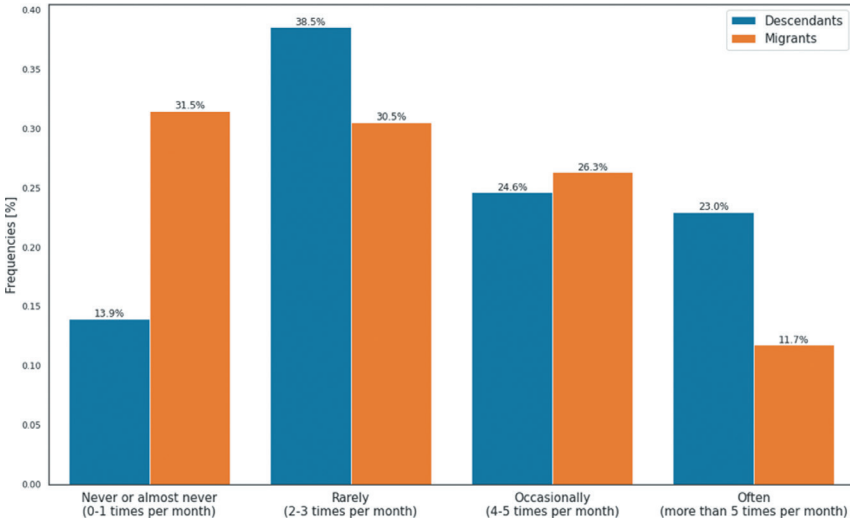


FIGURE 4.1 Frequency of dining at Asian restaurants before the pandemic

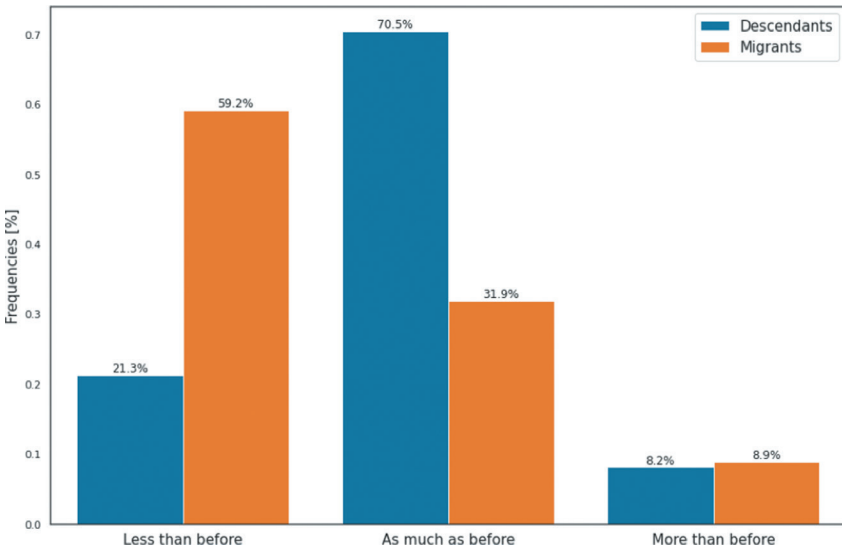


FIGURE 4.2 Evolution in the frequency of dining at Asian restaurants since the Covid-19 pandemic (January–mid-March 2020)

contrast, Chinese migrants born outside France—regardless of whether they obtained French citizenship—dined at Asian restaurants significantly less often. Most of them are connected through social networks (e.g., WeChat) in China and learned about the infectiousness of the Covid-19 virus very early. The reason for their dramatic decline in dining at Asian restaurants is closely

related to the safety logic. As Mr. Bao, a wholesaling entrepreneur based in Aubervilliers, said:

The other day, I passed a Chinese restaurant and I was somewhat drawn to dining there. I really thought about it. But two seconds later, I said to myself, “It would not be a good idea, because I would eat indoors [at the restaurant], and around me there were a lot of Chinese staff working there.” I ended up cooking at home that day! [laughs]

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Mr. Bao’s remarks show that consideration for his safety—to protect himself from the Covid-19 virus—led him to dramatically reduce dining in restaurants, in particular, Asian restaurants. In fact, he wanted to avoid indoor and crowded places where, according to him, the virus spread quickly and even more so at Asian restaurants because many patrons and staff members were Chinese or came from China.

The same safety logic heavily influenced Asian restaurant owners, a majority of whom are migrants from China. Many restaurants closed in January and February 2020, before the official lockdown in France (mid-March 2020), in order to reduce exposure to the virus and protect themselves.

In contrast, Chinese descendants born in France were influenced more by French media (see Chapter 1) and continued to dine at Asian restaurants until their parents asked them not to go to crowded places. First-generation migrants maintained restaurant dining habits consistent with the lockdown norms in China and severely limited eating out, whereas descendants born in France followed the mainstream practices in France and showed more significant continuity in their restaurant attendance.

In a mirror effect of the reduction in eating out, online ordering gained popularity as a general trend during the pandemic. In the next section, we examine the digital acceleration in catering and the food sector more broadly. Once again, various subgroups of Chinese migrants make different use of digital platforms for ordering food from restaurants and supermarkets.

#### 4.2 *Ordering Online: an Inevitable Digital Acceleration*

The measure imposed to maintain distance, combined with a series of health protocols established by local authorities, led to dramatic changes in food consumption habits during the pandemic, such as eating outdoors, and ordering deliveries of food online (takeout). Because of the development of the platform economy in recent years, ordering food via the internet or individual applications is not a new phenomenon. Before the Covid-19 pandemic,



apps such as UberEat, Deliveroo, or Just already had a loyal customer base. Other well-known apps, such as Alorsfaim (became Waysia), HungryPanda, or YQBuy, are run by Chinese entrepreneurs living in France. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, a large number of restaurants and supermarkets began to participate in the platform economy. As Mr. Zhang, an interviewee working for a Chinese online platform said:

Many restaurants are now turning to takeout. So, it's a new option because it's already very well established in China, and Chinese students who come here are used to it. It's an additional way for the restaurant to increase its revenue in such a difficult time.

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According to a study by Enrico Colla (2020), the most significant trend driven by the Covid-19 pandemic is strong growth in online sales, which attained market share of almost 10 percent (from around 6% before the pandemic) in the food industry.

In the context of migration, the use of new technologies increased in scope (Diaz & Nicolosi, 2019). The digital infrastructure in the catering sector offers more migrants food choice. Nevertheless, social differences among Chinese people in France are perpetuated, in terms of online food-ordering practices.

Figure 4.3 illustrates that, during the first few months of the pandemic, Chinese descendants born in France were less likely than migrants to order meals from online platforms. As discussed above, descendants still dined at Asian restaurants in person. Moreover, many of them still lived with their parents, who were in charge of cooking meals, so they had less need to order food from restaurants on a regular basis. By contrast, first-generation migrants ordered more frequently online. Many of them are young students who came from China in the past few years and are already familiar with online ordering in China, so they maintained this habit when they arrived in France. Moreover, they were mostly born in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s and have little experience in cooking; under those conditions, ordering takeout is a better option for them, both to obtain food that they enjoy and to remain safe during the pandemic.

The general tendency toward joining the online economy goes beyond the catering sector (online food delivery). It shapes not only the respondents' dining-out behavior but also food purchasing practices and thus their home cooking behavior. Figure 4.4 displays a subsample of the respondents who stated that they are used to ordering online, totaling 153 respondents (126 migrants and 27 descendants). The figure shows some interesting

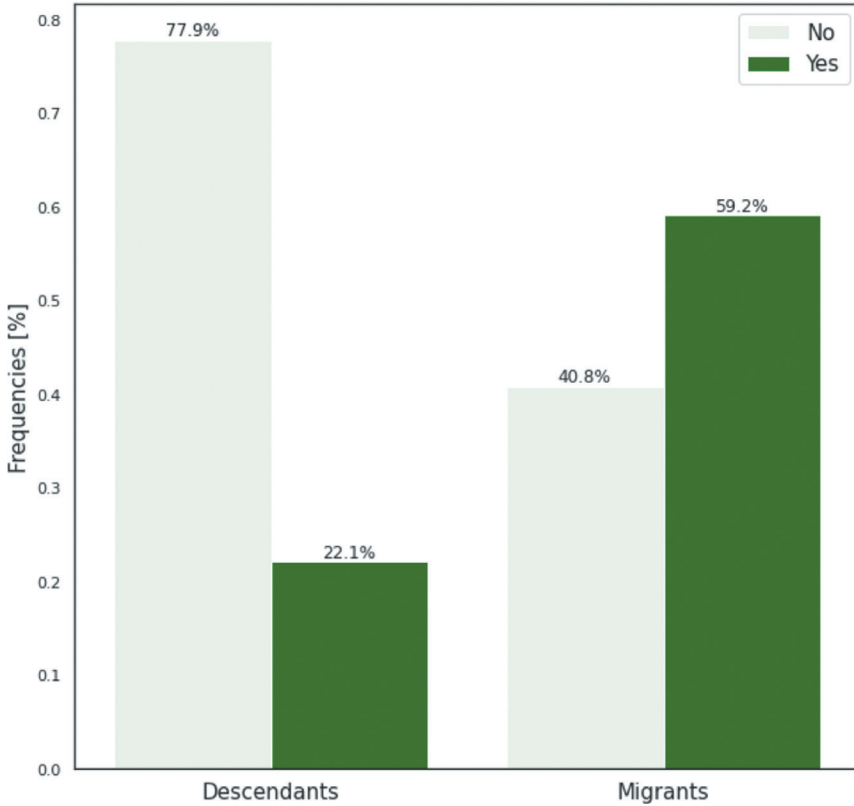


FIGURE 4.3 Did you order Asian cuisine online during the first national lockdown?

trends: with respect to ordering from online platforms, 50 percent of Chinese migrants state that they order meals from restaurants, and 91 percent say that they order products online from supermarkets. This confirms that Chinese migrants remain wary of meals prepared in restaurants, where infection can easily spread. Therefore, they prefer to buy the ingredients from supermarkets and prepare their own meals at home. But, when descendants place orders on online platforms, they massively purchase meals from restaurants, and very few order products from supermarkets. This might indicate that they are not afraid of infection from meals prepared in restaurants, and, at the same time, because they live with their parents, they are not used to ordering products from supermarkets and doing the cooking themselves. These trends confirm our analysis above.

#### 4.3 *The Reluctance of Restaurateurs to Sell Online*

The digital acceleration observed among consumers and their online ordering are inseparable from the willingness of restaurateurs to offer their food online.

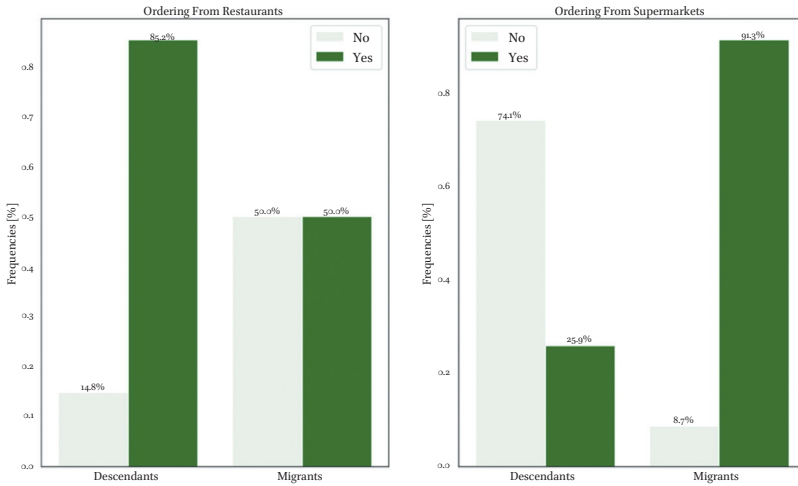


FIGURE 4.4 Online orders from Asian restaurants and supermarkets

Because of their complex cooking methods and a belief that the final presentation of their cuisine is “devalued” by the packaging needed for delivery, not all restaurateurs we met in our fieldwork were pleased about participating in the online economy.

Mr. Xu, a Chinese restaurant owner based in Paris, said,

I didn’t do takeout before because I was doing good business on site. During the pandemic, I closed my doors. Then, a lot of customers called me and said I had to do takeout, and they wanted to eat our meals, so I had no choice. Then I collaborated with an online platform for delivery, but I offered very different food from what is usually available. For example, I made steamed buns, which can easily to be prepared for takeout, but I did fewer northern Chinese dishes, such as Lu cuisine. It’s very good if you have it right away, but it is not as good after the long wait due to delivery.

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Mr. Xu is not an isolated case. Ms. Lan, the owner of a Chinese restaurant in Marseille, expressed similar doubts:

A long time ago, Deliveroo, UberEat, and JustEat all contacted us, but I refused to do takeout. But then I compromised, as I had no choice. We also have to survive. Nevertheless, I really oppose this takeout commercial behavior. I hope that guests can really enjoy the original taste of

dishes, but there is too much uncertainty in the packaging and delivery processes. It is hard to achieve the flavor expected with takeout.

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In general, Chinese restaurateurs were pushed by the Covid-19 pandemic to make a transition in their business model in order to engage in the online economy (Wang & Chen, 2021). Digital platforms significantly mitigated food safety issues that arose in the consumer chain. Nevertheless, many issues related to the food takeout business model have not yet been addressed, such as the authenticity of cuisine according to the restaurateurs interviewed, the loss of contact with customers in a physical space, and the environmental impact of packaging.

## 5 Conclusion

Combining a temporality approach (migration time frame) and an event approach (analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic), this chapter focuses on a range of food practices (home cooking and eating out) among Chinese people in France since 2020. Our study analyzes how food behaviors by the Chinese population changed, following two different but overlapping logics: the logic of safety for self-protection and the logic of prevention to maintain good personal health. The safety consideration introduced discontinuities in the food practices of Chinese people, such as buying in bulk and online food shopping and ordering. These behaviors were also observed in the general population in view of the health crisis and are not specific to the Chinese community. The notion of maintaining health with food reveals similarity with the principles of Chinese medicine and thus represents continuities for interviewees who were already followers of Chinese medicine.

A clear differentiation emerges between first-generation Chinese migrants and descendants born in France, with regard to both home cooking and eating out. In general, Chinese migrants were more vigilant about the risk of potential Covid-19 infection in different food practices and better able to apply dietary knowledge that newly emerged in China in order to enhance their health.

During the pandemic, these ordinary food practices show us the close links between the perception of risk, the representations of health and illness, and media consumption behaviors. Food norms are not fixed. They are constantly evolving, as shown during the pandemic, and they spread from place to place in the world. This chapter discusses how they spread from China to the Chinese diasporas around the world. In this process, digital tools play an increasing role, with democratization of new knowledge related to food. Finally, food norms

are constantly appropriated and reappropriated by people with different social backgrounds. The respondents found various ways to adapt their diet during the pandemic, with both continuity and discontinuity with their original habits. This chapter demonstrates that two interlacing logics are shaped and operate at the individual level.

From the perspective of food providers, the pandemic introduced a profound change in the marketing of food, beyond Asian catering. This trend is marked by accelerated digitization. As delivery and takeout were already popular in Asia before the pandemic, and as some Chinese entrepreneurs started to create online food-ordering platforms well before Covid-19, Chinese restaurateurs may have been better prepared than other caterers, at least on French soil, for the digital transition of their business.

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# A Community Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Collective Actions by Chinese Residents of a Multiethnic Neighborhood in the Northern Suburbs of Paris

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## Abstract

By focusing on Chinese migrants and their descendants living in the Village Residence, located in a multiethnic neighborhood north of Paris, this chapter examines collective actions (distribution of masks and Chinese medicines, food delivery for people who are infected) by the Chinese residents to respond to the pandemic, marked by many kinds of inequality in terms of access to health care. Previous tensions between Chinese and non-Chinese residents that predated the pandemic (related to the danger of racist attacks on Chinese people and previous struggles against urban violence) were resurrected and exacerbated by the health crisis. During the pandemic, new security borders were erected around the Chinese population and against non-Chinese populations. The border of protection became ethnically defined and protected the Chinese among themselves. At this housing development, Covid-19 was widely perceived as a disease of the “others.” Chinese residents are both subject to this racialization of the disease and participants in the dynamic by redefining distances and borders with neighbors of non-Chinese origin, in the name of safety and protection from Covid-19. Through this example, authors show the two consequences of community safekeeping: on the one hand, in a health emergency, especially early in the pandemic, before medical solutions to the coronavirus were developed, by practicing testing, tracing, and isolation, the community provided its members with vital medical and paramedical resources and support networks; on the other hand, the community spirit led to the exclusion of those who were perceived as foreign and potentially threatening to that community.

## Keywords

community response – collective actions – multiethnic neighborhood – residence – northern suburb – Paris – racialization of the disease – community safekeeping –

borders and bordering – inclusion and exclusion – community health – Chinese diaspora in France – Covid-19 pandemic – migrants – descendants

## 1 Introduction

As they confront the Covid-19 pandemic, migrants and members of ethnic and racial minorities have been vulnerable to its worst effects (Guemar et al., 2022; WHO, 2020). Inequality associated with migration has increased, in the context of financial insecurity, tighter border control, and political exclusion (Crawley, 2021). Although anyone can contract the virus, Covid-19 has affected migrants and ethnic minorities in developed countries disproportionately (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Carrión et al., 2021; Do & Frank, 2021; Lo et al., 2021; Wang, 2021b). In France, in March and April 2020 the deaths of people born outside France, of all causes, increased by 48 percent over the same period in 2019, compared with an increase of 22 percent among people born in France (Papon & Robert-Bobée, 2020).

Migrants are not only the victims of the pandemic or outsiders. All over the world, migrant communities reacted to the pandemic by developing initiatives of solidarity. There is a growing body of research on transnational migrants' responses to the pandemic, their coping strategies during the national lockdown, and their online and offline involvement in delivering public health information in global emergencies (Carstensen et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Fakhruddin et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2021; Yen et al., 2021; Zhang & Zhao, 2020). Based on their faith and national identity, shared emotions, experience, and networks, existing diasporic groups have organized philanthropy, fundraising, and provide financial, medical, and psychological assistance for marginalized community members (Guemar et al., 2022). The forms of solidarity developed by diaspora communities around the world can help to contain the spread of the virus in both their host country and their country of origin (IOM, 2020).

These initiatives are part of a context in which the Covid-19 pandemic has resurrected debates about “community health” as a more agile and locally tailored response to a pandemic (Marshall et al., 2012; Marston et al., 2020). For Marston and her colleagues, “community health” is defined as a co-construction of health professionals and local communities. The literature on “community health” can be divided into two streams. The first focuses on health care offered in the global South and closely related to primary care, one example of which is barefoot doctors in rural China during the Maoist era (Fang, 2012; Zhu et al., 1989). The accent is on a cooperative and trust-based care system established at a local level, usually in a neighborhood. Indeed, the



meaning of “community” is geographic. The second stream of the literature, mainly in English, considers “community” in the ethnic sense. Consistent with the Chicago school, studying “community” with a focus on urban social inequality due to the ethnic and racial power relations, these studies show that health workers look after their own ethnic group living in the same locality and engage in the promotion of health equality and social justice (Nelson, 2011). Without or with an ethnic dimension, both streams emphasize the importance of basic preventive medicine (not necessarily with a biomedical approach), the trust in the care relationship, the shared ethnic background/origin of health workers and the recipients of their services, the method of “doing with” (a supportive and caring, instead of domineering approach) in dealing with health issues.

Following these two streams of literature, our study focuses on the Chinese diaspora in France during the Covid-19 pandemic, extending the debate on “community health” to French society. To date, practices labeled as part of “community health” are marginal in France (Mariette, 2021). Researchers in France use this notion mainly in approaching prevention of HIV (Deschamps, 2008; Jourdan et al., 2012; Lefevre et al., 2014) and taking care of drug users (Autant-Dorier & Lebbal, 2018). Little work in France currently focuses on a community health approach during the pandemic (Fournier et al., 2021; Gaudillière et al., 2021; Mariette & Pitti, 2021), in both the territorial and ethnic sense. Indeed, at a time when national health-care systems throughout the Western world are overburdened, the participation of local populations, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, in various forms of community care is essential in reducing the damage from the Covid-19 pandemic and building collective resilience. In many democratic societies, the pandemic has eroded the relationship between citizens and the state but sparked the emergence of horizontal solidarity among citizens (Bertogg & Koos, 2021; Bor et al., 2021; Carlsen et al., 2021). In this context, acts of volunteerism and civic engagement by migrant communities during Covid-19 may have wider implications. They can contribute to social transformation within diasporic groups and create new social identities, feelings of belonging, and citizenship (Guemar et al., 2022; Sabar et al., 2021).

Among migrant communities, the Chinese diaspora stands out for its proactive response to Covid-19. Because of their multifaceted links to China, where the coronavirus first emerged, Chinese communities in Europe, North America, and around the world responded quickly to the risk of viral spread (Mamuji et al., 2021; Wennerholm, 2021). Sometimes, Chinese migrants mobilized in local contexts that were hostile to them and find themselves at odds with the attitudes and representations of the local populations and authorities.

One well-studied and very telling example is by anthropologists in Prato, Italy, which has the largest concentration of Chinese migrants in Europe (Leonardi & Marchetti, 2021). Krause and Bressan (2020) find that, in the Italian context, Prato was an exception with respect to infection in the Chinese migrant community, in part because of the spontaneous emergence of solidarity efforts, including gifts of masks, protective equipment, and respirators from the Chinese community; and they show that these practices have not only influenced political and bureaucratic activities during the pandemic but also improved them. Consequently, a widespread shift occurred in the dominant attitudes of native Italians toward Chinese migrants, shifting from xenophobia to respect.

This chapter clarifies the role played by ethnic minorities in the construction of a community response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research focuses on the collective actions by people of Chinese origin at a private condominium development in a northern suburb of Paris. In France, debates are ongoing about the function and future of areas with a large Chinese presence (e.g., La Courneuve and other districts in an area known as the *Petite Couronne*): should they be called ethnoburbs, defined as open systems or “locks” for new upward residential mobility (Desponds & Bergel, 2013)? Are we witnessing the emergence of an ethnic bastion or the formation of an ethnospatial minority? (Masclat, 2005). In French cities that are increasingly marked by superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007), spatial segregation, and difficulties in cohabitation between populations of diverse origins (Bastenier, 2004), what conditions favor the development of a community response to the pandemic? Are collective actions in challenging times based on ethnic and racial or territorial solidarity? How can we understand the strengths and limits of actions developed by community actors? Can local actions, initiated by an ethnic minority, contribute to blurring ethnic and racial boundaries and to opening up the minority community?

In dialogue with studies on community health and migrant communities' responses to the pandemic, this research contributes to this literature in several ways. First, a “community response” raises the central question of the definition of a community: at what scale is group identity defined? Where do migrants mobilize? We look at both the ethnic and territorial dimension of the collective actions of Chinese migrants, in a neighborhood already filled with ethnic and racial tension. Anthropologists have theorized about the importance of place as fundamental to the human condition. Margaret Rodman (1992) pushed the discipline to consider place not merely as a physical setting taken for granted but as a construct intricately linked to history, politics, and power relations. In this chapter, we explore not only the role of migrants' transnational connections in their mobilization against the spread of the virus but also the ways in which their place-based knowledge (their local relations, their

homeownership status, etc.) informed how they dealt with the threat of Covid-19. On the one hand, the issues and tensions before Covid-19 may have shaped the forms of collective action developed during the pandemic. On the other hand, collective actions influence social relations in the neighborhood, including power relations between Chinese and non-Chinese residents.

Second, it is important for us to consider the majority-minority dynamics at play in the local setting. Although Chinese residents have structural disadvantages due to their minority status in French society at large, they are becoming a majority in the housing development in which we carried out our study. We ask how, during the health crisis, the Chinese residents' majority status facilitated goal setting, decision-making, and the implementation of collective protective measures. To what extent were non-Chinese residents involved in these processes?

Finally, another important question concerns the social consequences of the community response-building efforts initiated by migrants. If ethnicity is a socially constructed boundary, a line of distinction that guides individuals' actions and values, then relationships between ethnic groups become dependent on "social distance" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Safi, 2011). During the pandemic, the creation of safe spaces presupposes the ability to choose with whom to interact physically in daily life, drawing a line between people with whom to socialize and those to avoid. How does this play out in the implementation of protective measures at the neighborhood level? How do social distancing measures affect neighborly relations? Do Chinese residents attempt to include members of the majority group or other racial minorities in their security bubbles? Has this health crisis changed neighborly relations between Chinese and non-Chinese residents?

In the following section, we first present our research method and the social context of Chinese migrants' settlement in this particular residential development. Then, we discuss the vulnerability of Chinese migrants to the pandemic and their recourse to aid in Chinese ethnic networks and in wider French society and analyze how Chinese residents mobilized in order to protect themselves and others. Third, we discuss the dynamics of interaction between Chinese and non-Chinese residents during and after Chinese migrants' collective actions.

## 2 Diasporic Homemaking and the Minority-Majority Dynamic

The empirical material in this chapter comes from a survey carried out in a condominium development in La Courneuve, a northern suburb of Paris.

Among the 400 units in the development, more than 300 are occupied by owners from mainland China (notably Wenzhou and Fujian), who sometimes rent their apartments to other Chinese migrants (about 50), making it one of the largest concentrations of Chinese households in the Paris region. Here, the development is called the Village Residence. The people are mentioned using pseudonyms.

In 2021, we investigated the Village Residence in two waves. In January 2021, at the end of the second national lockdown in France, we went to this development to interview two founders of the residents' association, Mr. Cheng and Mr. Zhang. Then, in July 2021, in the context of the widespread availability of the Covid-19 vaccine to all residents of France, we conducted a joint interview with Mr. Cheng and five Chinese residents (four men and one woman). The residents interviewed are in their forties and fifties and from Zhejiang or Fujian in southern China. In the typical scenario, the informants went to France in the 1990s and worked in different sectors for about ten years, without legal status. After becoming legal residents, they bought their apartments in the Village Residence in the early 2000s. The similarity of our respondents in terms of social profile reflects our field conditions. As we were introduced to the residents by Mr. Cheng and Mr. Zhang, the leaders of the residents association, we had little opportunity to meet people who did not participate in the public affairs of the development (e.g., descendants, migrant women). Contacting non-Chinese residents was also difficult and inappropriate in the context of conflicts between Chinese and non-Chinese residents over management of the development (see below). In July, we also interviewed the founder of the CFFC, a mutual assistance association for Chinese migrants in Paris (see Chapter 6), who has worked for several years to support Chinese migrants living at the Village Residence. These interviews are complemented by observation and informal discussions held on social media with our respondents. The longitudinal dimension of our survey enables us to grasp the changes in the behavior and attitudes of Chinese migrants during the different stages of the pandemic.

In France, legal Chinese migrants have a strong tendency to become homeowners. Unlike other groups, notably migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, who are overrepresented in low-income public housing (*habitation à loyer modéré*, HLM) (Pan Ké Shon & Scodellaro, 2011), Chinese migrants tend to purchase or rent market-rate housing (Du, 2020). The residential clustering of Chinese migrants results from the combined effects of spatial and economic relegation and the ethnic housing market. The ethnic and socio-economic exclusion that Chinese migrants experience in the rental market pushes them to become homeowners and to cluster through ethnic bonding (Du, 2020). Previous work has shown that the housing issue contributes to

the formation of minority communities (Merle, 2020): from this perspective, the clustering of Chinese families in this working-class neighborhood with a strong immigrant tradition is the product of intersectional mechanisms of socioeconomic/ethnic and racial inequality and spatial relegation. Built in 1974, the Village Residence, which consists of three buildings and was initially inhabited by French public servants and migrants from southern Europe, was intended by the municipality to promote social diversity. In the 1970s, migrants from Southeast Asia moved in, and some became homeowners. In the 2000s, the development began to attract Chinese economic migrants working in Paris who were priced out of the real estate market there. These “pioneer” Chinese buyers were quickly joined by their relatives and countrymen. Homeownership represents social ascent for migrants who work mostly in ethnic economic niches (catering, clothing, wholesale trade, etc.). However, after they arrived, Chinese residents became targets of repeated robberies and racist attacks by neighborhood youths, described by our respondents as delinquents of North African and sub-Saharan origin who live in the large low-income housing projects across the street.

A turning point in the collective actions of Chinese residents was reached on the evening of July 13, 2016, when Chinese inhabitants of the Village Residence reacted to a robbery targeting a Chinese person by chasing the offenders. The alleged perpetrators later returned with reinforcements and threatened the Chinese residents with a gun, leading to an escalation in violence and the intervention of the French police. Three Chinese residents were injured, driving the Chinese community (especially those from Wenzhou), out of an acute sense of insecurity, to mobilize around the issue of safety by rallying together with bureaucratic and government actors (police, city hall, prefectural representatives, etc.).

These common struggles inspired a feeling of solidarity and vigilance as well as series of security measures. The Chinese residents created a neighborhood association, a non-profit association as per the 1901 law. Its members often meet in an office located on the ground floor of one of the buildings. Surveillance cameras were installed throughout the development, at the front door of every apartment occupied by a Chinese household. Chinese residents regularly exchange messages in various WeChat groups to share news or warnings and ask for help in real time. Most importantly, under the impetus of Chinese residents, the syndicate of co-ownership of the condominium (a legal entity consisting of all the co-owners) voted to build a fence to secure the residential complex. This fence represents the border between the safe living space of the development and the risky world outside, represented by the low-income housing outside its gates.

In her study, Merle (2020) used the concept of an ethno-spatial minority to analyze the structural factors in the residential clustering of Chinese migrants in the Parisian suburbs. They chose not to quietly suffer the effects of exclusion and discrimination but, rather, to settle there and make that housing development their own. This is a well-known phenomenon: in real estate purchasing decisions, it is less about choosing one's property than one's neighbors (Bacqué et al., 2007). Thus, most of our respondents purchased an apartment in this development because it enables them to meet up with friends, family members, or fellow Chinese from the same village or town. In our interviews, the respondents say that they enjoy living with people who speak the same language and share the same customs. According to some respondents, when there are more Chinese residents, they can defend themselves against aggression and racist violence more effectively, through mobilization of human and financial resources in their community and strength in numbers in a public space. In addition, some migrants expressed a desire to "flood the zone," acquiring as many apartments as possible and making them into places where they can relax, socialize, and let their children study. Thus, when a Chinese owner of an apartment is ready to sell it, he seeks Chinese buyers almost exclusively; and when an apartment owned by a non-Chinese comes onto the market, the Chinese residents circulate the information within their social networks, to ensure that the property is bought by one of their own.

This minority-majority dynamic deserves some attention. Although these migrant residents suffer from being in a racial minority in the living society, they nonetheless form an absolute majority where they live. Because of this majority, the Chinese residents were able to make their security demands heard by the condominium union council and obtain funding to build the fence around the development. The outcome of any vote concerning the housing development depends on the will of a close-knit Chinese majority: the balance of power is in the hands of Chinese residents. However, this numerically dominant Chinese majority met with some resistance from non-Chinese residents in normal times as well as during the health-care crisis. Our investigation analyzes the mechanisms of mobilization by Chinese residents during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the impacts of this mobilization on neighborhood relationships.

### 3 Migrants' Vulnerability during the Pandemic

The Chinese migrants we interviewed have several disadvantages that make them vulnerable to disease. In normal times, the Chinese residents of the

Village Residence have difficulty accessing local health care because of their geographic location. For several decades, the Parisian suburbs have faced a phenomenon of medical desertification. La Courneuve, in which the Village Residence is located, suffers from a shortage of medical equipment and health professionals. Although located only a few kilometers from Paris, La Courneuve has only 5.3 general practitioners and 2.4 specialists per 10,000 inhabitants, while the 6th arrondissement of Paris has 20.3 general practitioners and 68.5 specialists per 10,000 inhabitants. More generally, the Île-de-France region offers a ratio of 8.9 general practitioners per 10,000 inhabitants (L'Humanité, 2012). In addition to spatial inequality, social distance separates Chinese migrants from the French health-care system. Although almost all Chinese residents have a French social security number—even Chinese who lack a legal residence card can benefit from universal medical coverage in France—access to medical care remains difficult because of the language barrier. The intervention of a French-speaking third party (a child who goes to school in France, a volunteer from a migrant aid association, etc.) is necessary for Chinese migrants to obtain medical care: make an appointment, see the doctor, follow-up, and so forth.

Numerous studies have explored health inequality in terms of race and migration status. Compared to the native population, foreign migrants are in poorer health and have lower socioeconomic conditions, which constitute risk factors and explain their higher death rate in a public health crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Brown, 2018; Marcello et al., 2022; Sze et al., 2020). As exemplified by the Chinese migrants in France, immigrant conditions leave them open not only to psychological or physical diseases but also inequality in access to care (Wang, 2021a). The high mortality rate of foreign migrants in the Seine-Saint-Denis, where La Courneuve is located, can be explained in part by exposure factors, such as the use of public transportation and crowded housing (Brun & Simon, 2020). We do not have statistical data on Chinese morbidity and mortality in this regional department during the pandemic. In their interviews, Chinese migrants perceived themselves as vulnerable to Covid-19. They spoke of the population density and the contact with other ethnic groups in their development. They were also concerned about the risk of infection due to their daily use of public transportation (Carrion et al., 2021). The Village Residence is not an ethnic enclave in that Chinese residents do not pursue their professional activities where they live; rather, they do so in Paris or in other Paris suburbs (particularly in Aubervilliers). After the outbreak of Covid-19 in France, most Chinese residents still needed to commute to work by public transportation. Some chose to take the least crowded bus or metro train. Others preferred to be driven to work by their employer.

When Covid-19 broke out in China, Chinese residents became aware of its dangers early on because of their close ties with China. In late January 2020, Mr. Cheng wanted to return to China for the Chinese New Year. But as soon as he learned about the coronavirus outbreak in China, he canceled his trip. When the Covid-19 virus began to spread in France, and the number of infections reached several hundred, Mr. Cheng, who is a chef at a Chinese restaurant, asked his employer for a leave of absence. He also alerted his WeChat groups to the danger of the virus.

Like Mr. Cheng, many Chinese residents understood the seriousness of the health crisis early on and responded proactively to the onset of the pandemic. But they saw a large discrepancy between what they thought was an adequate response to the pandemic and the reactions of the French government and French public to the coming health crisis. Thus, in January and February 2020, Chinese residents, like the French population in general, experienced a shortage of masks and personal protective equipment. Some of them were still able to buy masks in pharmacies or receive donations from Chinese organizations. Ironically, they did not dare to wear them in public out of fear of racist attacks, especially by young people of other ethnic minorities, as mentioned earlier. Our respondents also understood the importance of social distancing to protect themselves and to contain the spread of Covid-19. But many continued to work out of economic necessity. For example, four days after he stopped working, Mr. Cheng was called back to work by his employer, to serve in the restaurant. He did not stop working until March 17, when the first national lockdown was declared in France.

In March 2020, Covid-19 infections were spreading in France, and the first case of Covid-19 was found at the Village Residence. At the time, because a request for Emergency Medical Aid Service (*Service d'Aide Médicale Urgente, SAMU*) had to be made with a special phone number, Chinese migrants had difficulty getting through because of their poor command of French. They also lacked understanding of the French management of the crisis, as Chinese who fell ill did not understand why they were asked to stay home when they developed severe symptoms, whereas in China, those who are infected with Covid-19 are systematically confined and treated at public hospitals (and field hospitals). Many Chinese who caught the virus felt abandoned by the French health-care system. Above all, they did not want to bring the Covid-19 virus home and infect their families and other loved ones. The comments by our respondents show the fear, stress, and desperation among Chinese migrants at the beginning of the pandemic:

Mr. Zhang: Among the Chinese here, if one of us is infected with Covid-19, it's really hard for him to ask for help. ... The first difficulty



is the language. The second is that he is frightened. Because when someone who does not speak French very well seeks help from the SAMU, even if it is serious, it does not come immediately.

Mr. Cheng: I tell you, in fact, there are many French patients. The doctor feels that the medical resources are not enough. If you are a foreigner, he does not care about you at all. [He will say] there are no beds, or something. He will find all kinds of reasons to put you off. If you're not seriously ill, he tells you to stay at home for a few days, that's it.

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Mr. Cheng told us what happened to a friend of his from Qingtian. This friend contracted Covid-19 in March 2020 and developed breathing difficulties. When he called the SAMU, he was diagnosed as having a mild case and told to go home and quarantine himself. The man was afraid to go home because he had elderly parents, his wife, and his children at home. It was very cold, and he sat alone in a park and called Mr. Cheng for help. He began to cry because he was so nervous. Mr. Cheng comforted him and asked the director of a Chinese organization to call his friend, reassure him, and tell him what to do. Later, the man called his family and told them all to leave the apartment, then went home, and isolated himself in one room. During his quarantine, he took acetaminophen and herbs sent to him by Mr. Cheng. He commented: "I feel that the SAMU doctors didn't pay much attention to him. It doesn't matter if it's a mild case or a serious case. You must tell him what to do. You can't say go home and you will be fine."

In the context of the overloaded French health-care system at the beginning of the pandemic, Chinese migrants shared an acute awareness of the danger of Covid-19 and a bitter realization of the inaccessibility of institutional medical care. Therefore, they felt justified in using informational, economic, and medical resources through Chinese social networks and self-run systems of care within the development.

#### 4 Medical Care, Social Support: a Community Response to Covid-19

The Chinese residents of the Village residence quickly set up a series of individual and collective protective measures. Collective actions were based on social ties between Chinese co-ethnics, especially between homeowners of Wenzhou origin who share a common dialect, a regional identity, and social proximity in terms of social and professional status.

Even before the French authorities implemented public health policies to stem the spread of the virus, Chinese residents began to mobilize their own community resources. In our interviews, our respondents often referred to episodes of urban violence when describing their actions during Covid-19. For them, Covid-19 was just one of many crises that they have had to deal with. The monitoring and mutual support mechanisms inherited from previous collective actions were an undeniable asset in containing the spread of coronavirus. WeChat groups, for example, enabled residents to circulate information about Covid-19, share best practices, and monitor the situation at the development. This enhanced social control among Chinese residents was instrumental in enforcing the French government's containment measures. For example, during the first national lockdown in France, almost all Chinese residents were confined to their homes. They went out only when it was strictly necessary. Even children stayed at home, and, if they went out, they wore masks. Apart from the great pressure on individuals for conformity exerted by the community, Chinese residents internalized a feeling of personal responsibility for the collective: Covid-19 is perceived as a vital danger to oneself, one's relatives, and the entire development.

Given this, people infected with Covid-19 might find themselves victims of social stigma by their compatriots. Out of discretion, or fear of ostracism, Chinese migrants who are infected rarely announce their illness in public on WeChat groups. They prefer to isolate at home. But it is difficult to hide an illness in a development characterized by a village spirit, with residents who know a lot about one another and have strong interdependent ties. Someone who does not show up for ten days or so quickly becomes the subject of attention and questioning. Moreover, in the event of serious symptoms that required the intervention of the SAMU, the entire development was informed. Thus, Mr. Cheng knows practically all the Chinese residents and was informed of whenever one of them was infected. According to him, between March 2020 and July 2021, about ten Chinese people there were infected with Covid-19.

This relatively low rate of infection is largely due to the collective actions of the Chinese residents. Early on, they adopted protective and preventive measures that proved effective in the Chinese context. Within the development, people who are suspected of having been exposed to Covid-19, are immediately tested and placed under quarantine. In the event of a confirmed infection, the infected person is advised to spend about ten days in a hotel room before returning to their families. In other instances, people who developed symptoms confined themselves to their homes. Volunteers from the residents' association delivered food to them during the quarantine. They might have also brought them *lianhua qingwen*, so it has been used to treat mild Covid-19

symptoms. In return, those affected had to provide their Covid-19 test results, as it was in short supply and had to be reserved those most seriously affected.

Among the collective preventive measures taken by the Chinese residents of the Village, maintaining social distancing was considered essential. At the beginning of the pandemic, Chinese residents stopped all festive activities and severely reduced their socializing. According to their accounts, they ceased outings to tobacco vendors, cafes, weddings, and children's events. Even on Chinese New Year in 2021, Chinese residents avoided gatherings. This is in sharp contrast to the time before the pandemic, which was characterized by significant socializing between neighbors. Families and households tried to create bubbles or groups in which they only saw one another. During the first lockdown, parents generally stopped working outside the home. After the first national lockdown, Chinese children who had to go to school wore masks throughout the day to protect themselves and their families. Mr. Zhang and Mr. Cheng told us that when their daughters went home, they followed preventive measures such as washing their hands, leaving their shoes and clothes in a dressing room, and keeping potentially contaminated and uncontaminated areas of the house separate. Disinfection concerned not only one's personal belongings but also the common areas in the development. In every building of the Village development, Chinese volunteers took charge of cleaning and disinfecting the common facilities, including the elevator.

The strength of the migrant community, compared to other local communities, comes from its many ties to its country of origin. For example, at the early stages of the pandemic, Chinese migrants at the Village development used their diasporic networks to obtain PPE and to seek help from outside France. In February 2020, during mask shortages in France, our respondents reached out to their families in China, and they sent about 3,000 masks, which were distributed to the Chinese residents. Then, during the first lockdown, the residents received masks from the Chinese embassy through the volunteers of the Committee of Chinese Associations in Seine-Saint-Denis (CAC93), an organization that aims to promote friendship and cooperation between Chinese community and other social groups and to assist the local authorities in improving the safety of the inhabitants of Seine-Saint-Denis region. When masks were available again in France, our respondents brought some masks to the office of the residents' association, for the benefit of Chinese and non-Chinese residents.

At the same time, our respondents bought traditional Chinese medicines from China. In February 2020, through a WeChat group whose members included many medical experts in China, they learned about the effectiveness of some traditional Chinese medicines in treating Covid-19. They asked

their families in China to buy these drugs in large quantities and send them to France, to meet the needs of the residents. During the first two waves of the pandemic, the residents' association became a hub for obtaining masks, medicines, and other products. The resident's association occasionally prepared and distributed a special Chinese medicinal beverage to protect the residents against Covid-19 and strengthen their immunity. The distributions started at seven o'clock in the morning. Two electric hotplates were set up in the office of the residents' association, and a few elderly Chinese residents prepared the medicinal brew. More than two hundred Chinese residents—men, women, and children—lined up in front of the office to get a cup of it, including those from other neighborhoods. The organizers distributed up to one thousand cups per day.

Most of the Chinese residents at the Village development are small entrepreneurs and traders in ethnic markets and live with their families. In normal times, most residents are active, and the women are heavily involved in economic activities. Chinese residents are proud of their ability to make a living from their activities. However, in May and June 2020, when the health crisis continued, many residents were forced to close their businesses and found themselves in financial difficulty. According to our respondents, they had very little mutual financial support for two main reasons. First, asking for financial help from their Wenzhou compatriots involved a loss of face. Second, legal migrants were eligible for assistance to workers and businesses during Covid-19 from the French government. However, we noted that there were occasional gestures of mutual aid among the residents. For example, neighbors did not hesitate to distribute food to those who fell ill and were confined to their homes.

## 5 The Limits of the Community Response

The protective measures put in place by Chinese residents were not limited to people of Chinese origin and were extended to non-Chinese residents as well. It was obvious to our interlocutors that fighting Covid-19 would require the entire population of the development to be mobilized and protected. That is why masks were freely available at the office of the residents' association. Mr. Zhang always tried to encourage non-Chinese residents to come and get masks. When he encountered non-Chinese residents in the building who were not wearing masks, he asks them to put one on. In this way, the "bubble" that the Chinese residents wanted to create also included non-Chinese residents. Therefore, to prevent residents from going shopping, at the request of

the Chinese residents, in March 2020 a Wenzhou merchant began to visit the development on Sunday afternoons in his van to distribute vegetables from their greengrocer.

However, the resources made available to all residents seemed to benefit Chinese residents most. Based on our interviews and observations, few non-Chinese residents went to the association office to pick up masks or traditional Chinese medicines. Other than the lack of knowledge of Chinese medicine, the language barrier and the closed nature of Chinese social networks seems to be the reason for this phenomenon.

In fact, information about the public health measures put in place by Chinese residents were disseminated mostly through WeChat groups, a social network used almost exclusively by Chinese residents. This resulted in mutual ignorance. Non-Chinese residents were not necessarily aware of what had been set up by their Chinese neighbors, and Chinese residents were not aware of the health conditions of the residents of other backgrounds. Mr. Zhang and Mr. Cheng told us that they knew about Covid-19 infections among non-Chinese residents only when the SAMU arrived. Recall that the Chinese do not comprise a homogeneous group. The main actors in the collective actions of the development were landlords with origins in Wenzhou. The tenants, often those from North China, were not members of the owners' WeChat group and rarely took part in the decision-making process.

In France, the outbreak of Covid-19 was accompanied by racialization of the disease (Ali, 2008; see Chapter 10). The spread of the virus was associated with people perceived as Asians and then with racial minorities in the Parisian suburbs who supposedly failed to comply with government health guidelines (Geisser, 2020). We found that the racialization of Covid-19 and the social stigma linked to the disease went in both directions. At the beginning of the pandemic, Chinese residents were often perceived by others as carriers of the coronavirus. However, after Covid-19 seemed to be under control in China and in the Chinese community in France, the accusations changed direction. In our interviews, respondents often valued Chinese vigilance, including by children, and criticized the carelessness and comparatively lax attitude by other groups, particularly sub-Saharan Africans and North Africans, who did not wear masks or wore them incorrectly.

In this context, the collective actions of Chinese residents tended to strengthen their ingroup ties while accentuating their distrust of members of outgroups. Chinese residents' efforts to secure their living space sometimes led to the exclusion and distancing of people suspected of carrying the virus into the development. Thus, in the second half of July 2021, with the rapid spread of the Delta variant (also known as the Indian variant) in France, the

leaders of the residents' association warned Chinese residents in the WeChat group about the presence of Indian and Bengali tenants there, advising that they be avoided in common areas. Mr. Cheng described how he dealt with this population:

When I see Indians, I don't greet them. I am afraid of the Delta variant. The Indians are becoming more and more numerous in our development. Indian owners house about ten people. I see them come and go. When I meet Indians who are not wearing masks, I call out to them, "Sir, please put your mask on!" I know all the owners. In general, the Chinese rent to the Chinese, to those from northeastern China, for example. But some Chinese rent to Bengalis. I try to persuade them not to rent to Bengalis and Indians.

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However, Mr. Cheng ultimately regrets saying that, as he had no control over the presence of the Indians and Bengalis because some Chinese owners did not live in the residence and entrusted the management of their homes to real estate agencies. Therefore, the owners cannot choose their tenants. In our interview, Mr. Cheng denied that he was discriminating against people of South Asian origin: "We don't discriminate against them. We avoid them."

One thing is clear: the experiences during the pandemic reinforced the respondents' willingness to live among Chinese people who shared the same beliefs and practices about Covid-19.

Mr. Zhang: Really. We just want to be with other Chinese. Because the Chinese are more protected. We like to live together. We say, "Oh, let's live together; let's not let foreigners live [in our midst]." It's not racist. It's not. Because I've seen how they eat and how they wear their masks beneath their nose [rather than covering it]. This is true, right? We have all seen it, and we are afraid to say it.

Mr. Cheng: Foreigners like to be free. They are used to freedom and laziness. For example, when the government restricts their freedom, they feel a great mental blow. But we Chinese listen to the call of the government. When the government says stay at home, we stay at home. They [foreigners] ... don't listen to [the government]. They go out in the street without wearing a mask. There are a lot of such things ... so why does this virus spread so fast? It's because of them.

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The reinforcement of group cohesion, coupled with distancing from other groups (other minorities, but also the French), may have led to an increase in social distance between the Chinese and non-Chinese residents. Some neighborhood conflicts intensified during the pandemic, and the lack of in-person meetings made conflict resolution more difficult—for example, with respect to the conflicts within the condominium union council. These conflicts date back to the period before the pandemic and reflect the deep divide between Chinese and non-Chinese owners regarding the management of the development, including conflicts over common expenses. Chinese owners consider security and hygiene a priority and systematically oppose expenses for building renovation and landscaping, which they consider pointless. Non-Chinese owners, especially retired French people, tend to consider security problems specific to the Chinese population, and are more concerned with the appearance of their development. Because of their rudimentary command of French, the Chinese owners tried to hire a Chinese-speaking property management company and fire the current French property management company, which had the trust of the president of the council. During the pandemic, the union council meetings were suspended. The Chinese owners' representatives were excluded from the union council meeting held during the last lockdown. At the time of our second interview in July 2021, the Chinese owners had filed a lawsuit against the current president of the board, a French man of Spanish origin who is a retired firefighter. The Chinese plaintiffs are being represented by a young lawyer who is the child of Chinese migrants and went to law school in France.

## 6 Conclusion

As a crisis that is experienced both locally and globally, Covid-19 has given rise to different forms of solidarity between social actors. The government, NGOs, medical professionals and grass-root activists have been brought together by the threat of the virus (Holley, 2020). By focusing on Chinese migrants and their descendants who living at the Village Residence, located in a multiethnic neighborhood north of Paris, our research shows that collective actions have been used to fight the pandemic based on the example of a condominium complex. In a social world marked by multiple inequalities in terms of access to health care and acutely aware of their own vulnerability to Covid-19, Chinese residents reacted proactively to the pandemic by enforcing social distancing, establishing quarantines for infected residents, and organizing the distribution of masks, medicine, and mutual aid, among others. These collective actions

were based on ethnic ties but also on neighborhood solidarity and security mechanisms inherited from previous efforts to combat urban violence. They tended to strengthen ingroup cohesion among people of Chinese origin.

This strengthening of ingroup cohesion goes hand in hand with increased distance from members of outgroups. Through the history of this condominium development, we see how Chinese migrant residents reacted to every major challenge by strengthening security and the boundaries for community protection. Before Covid-19, the danger of racist attacks on Chinese residents seemed to come from outside the development. The protective boundaries were spatially defined and represented by a physical barrier. During the health crisis, as the virus spread throughout the French population, the danger of infection encompassed the development, through daily contact with neighbors. New security borders emerged around the Chinese population and against non-Chinese populations. The protective border has become ethnically defined and protects the Chinese among themselves. We show that, in this community, Covid-19 is widely perceived as a disease of the “others.” Chinese residents are both subject to this racialization of the disease and participants in the dynamic, for example, by associating the Delta variant with people from South Asia and avoiding all contact with that population. This example demonstrates the two consequences of the community-building process: on the one hand, in a health emergency, the community provides vital medical and paramedical resources and support networks to its members; on the other hand, the community spirit leads to the exclusion of those who are perceived as foreign and potentially threatening to its own existence.

Certainly, by protecting themselves, Chinese residents contribute to the containment of the virus. However, some of the collective actions by the Chinese residents also aim to protect the community as a whole (e.g., mask distribution and cleaning common areas). However, contrary to what Krause and Bresson (2020) described in the Chinese population in Prato, the collective actions of the Chinese in the Village Residence have not led to fraternization among people of different origins, even when these actions contribute to the common good. They have not created greater acceptance and recognition of Chinese residents in their neighborhood. Rather, the health crisis exacerbated existing tensions and conflicts between Chinese and non-Chinese residents over the management of their living space. The dominance of Chinese owners in the public affairs of the condo development led to disapproval and resistance by non-Chinese owners. The need to maintain social distancing during the pandemic made meetings, democratic processes, and conflict resolution more difficult.

During the pandemic, in France as well as in other Western countries, racial minorities have often been described through the prism of their deviation



from the norm in terms of risk awareness and self-protective behavior, such as social distancing (Gibbons, 2021). Our research offers a counterexample, indicating that racial minorities can also be characterized by strict compliance with government health measures and the proactive development of responses to Covid-19. Early in the pandemic, when biomedical solutions to coronavirus were absent, through testing, tracing, and isolation, the residents of the Village Residence developed a community response to the pandemic. Community activists, building on relationships of trust and solidarity and on their own charismatic authority, in some ways have substituted for physicians and social workers in providing care for those affected by Covid-19. The collective actions of Chinese residents demonstrate the effectiveness of the public health approach (which is based on an analysis of health needs, the measurement of health risks and the capacity to prevent, detect and manage health problems), compared to the biomedical approach in addressing health issues. However, those in the field do not believe that they are engaged in the search for a clear distinction between the biomedical approach and a public health (especially nonmedical) approach. In other words, they are not opposed to these two approaches in the fighting Covid-19. In the survey, on several occasions, our respondents asked us if we could find a trusted physician to provide health care at their development. They also placed great hope in vaccines to protect themselves against Covid-19, whether Chinese or Western (see Chapter 2). Thus, in our fieldwork, community actions, as contemporary responses to a health emergency, are seen by the respondents as a useful complement to medical institutions and state actions. Although Chinese medicines provided valuable support to Chinese residents during the first phases of the pandemic, widespread vaccination of the French population, including Chinese migrants, who could participate in the French vaccination program free of charge, gave our respondents the confidence to return to a quasi-normal life and to participate in our group interviews.

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**SECTION 2**

*Focus on Specific Chinese Populations in France  
during the Covid-19 Pandemic*



# Social Ties of Elderly Migrants during Covid-19: the Chinese in Paris

*Simeng Wang*

## Abstract

This chapter focuses on the ways in which elderly Chinese migrants maintain social ties—with their family members, peer groups, the living society, and the country of origin—from January to October 2020 during the pandemic. This chapter is based not only on the empirical data collected as part of the MigraChiCovid project but also the data gathered on the daily activities by a Franco-Chinese association, the Chinese of France, French of China (CFFC) located in the neighborhood of Paris called Belleville. The study highlights the reconfiguration of different types of social ties and interactions between them. Family ties are marked by intergenerational solidarity: mutual assistance and reverse transmission, and, at the same time, they are characterized by a gap between respondents and their descendants in how they understand the disease and perceive risk. Despite the reduction in physical contact and face-to-face social activities, elderly Chinese developed and maintained peer ties through the use of WeChat. Online exchanges with other seniors and volunteers at CFFC helped them to combat isolation and loneliness and to mitigate everyday stress and fear of the disease. As the pandemic progressed, this population, which was already marginalized, distanced itself further from their living society. Indeed, starting in January/February 2020, by engaging in self-lockdown as a protective measure against infection, elderly Chinese became almost invisible in public space during the first lockdown from March to May 2020. Meanwhile, despite the great physical distance and restrictions on international travel, elderly people who had come from mainland China maintained strong ties with their country of origin, in particular through the consumption of official Chinese media and social media. This chapter also provides some reflections on the role of social workers in supporting elderly immigrants in the digital and pandemic era: the use of the smartphone truly supported their capacity to act. Covid-19 has led to the emergence of new channels for delivering care to elderly Chinese, particularly with digital tools.



## Keywords

social ties – elderly migrants – Chinese in France – Covid-19 pandemic – migrants – descendants – Franco-Chinese association – family dynamics – intergenerational solidarity – peer ties – WeChat – mental health – stress – fear – living country – self-lockdown – country of origin – Chinese media – social media – social worker – social supporting – smartphone – care – digital tools

## 1 Introduction

Examining the aging of elderly migrants offers new perspectives for social gerontology theories, which often tend to analyze the elderly in a single societal context, with relatively homogeneous cultures, mind-sets, and values (Torres, 2008).<sup>1</sup> In fact, elderly people who were born elsewhere and often socialized in their country of origin are exposed to a multitude of social norms and representations from different societies, which sometimes contradict one another. The reappropriation of these norms and representations originally redefines aging and “successful aging” by the migrants (Martineau & Plard, 2018; Torres, 2001).

To understand “successful aging,” we examine two key components: the first is individuals’ health status, and the second are the extent of individuals’ social networks, social participation, and social engagement. For elderly migrants, social networks and participation in social life also include their relationships and activities maintained with their country of origin. In the context of migration, local and transnational social networks can function as resources for elderly people, who employ them in different and uneven ways: some have greater capacities for adaptation and resilience to cope with upcoming changes than others (Angel & Angel, 1992).

Numerous studies on elderly people of foreign origin conducted in France (Dourgnon et al., 2009; Dubus & Braud, 2001; Madoui, 2015; Samaoli, 2011) show their specific vulnerabilities as follows: (1) lack of knowledge about social welfare benefits, (2) poor language skills in the host country language,

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1 This chapter was originally published and coauthored with Boris Schwartz and Tamara Lui in French in 2022, in *Gérontologie & Santé* (vol. 44, no. 168), and is translated, updated and edited with permission. In this chapter, we focus on Chinese people over the age of sixty. Furthermore, we emphasize that the definition of “elderly,” a social construct, varies depending on time and national context. For instance, in current Chinese society, a person who is retired—a man usually retires at the age of sixty and a woman between fifty and fifty-five—can be socially perceived as elderly.

(3) prejudices toward and mistrust of social services, (4) a digital divide exacerbated by the lack of language skills, which impedes the use of administrative procedures, and (5) the dilemma between returning to the country of origin (Bolzman et al., 2006) and remaining in the host country (Emsellem, 2016). Other research focuses on the ability of elderly immigrants to implement regular transnational practices between France and their country of origin (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2005) and to live successively, and sometimes simultaneously, in two different worlds via digital technology (Crenn, 2011).

With respect to the aging Chinese population in Western countries, Shuang Liu (2021) identifies “aging in a foreign land as a home-building process.” By analyzing the household at three levels—physical (places of residence), relational (social ties), and transnational (autobiographical trajectories)—Liu shows that aging “in place” (in Australia) is not associated with a single physical location or to a single culture. Ruby C. M. Chau and Sam Wai-Kam Yu (2010) analyze the heterogeneity of the needs of elderly people of Chinese origin in the UK and argue that the National Health Service needs to understand them better as well as provide more appropriate health care, with special attention to “traditional” and “alternative” health practices. A recent study on elderly Chinese migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands finds an increase in loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic, because of protective measures (i.e., reducing social participation, especially outdoor group activities) and financial insecurity (Pan et al., 2021). This echoes the experiences of older Chinese immigrants to Canada during the Covid-19 pandemic: challenges related to grief, loneliness, social isolation, ageism, and racism (Wang et al., 2021). Wang et al. show the resilience and strength of the elderly Chinese, particularly because of the adoption of technology in their daily lives. All these papers emphasize the importance of intergenerational solidarity (Ayalon et al., 2021; Ellerich-Groppe et al., 2021) and call for attention to be paid not only to physical health but also to the subjective well-being of older adults (Gu & Feng, 2021) during the pandemic.

In France, one of first empirical studies focusing on elderly Chinese who live in the Belleville neighborhood—located at the crossroads of four Parisian districts (the tenth, eleventh, nineteenth, and twentieth arrondissements)—shows that this group is relatively invisible in public, which might be due to the prevailing language barriers and the various forms of discrimination that they experience (Wang & Schwartz, 2016). Unlike Chinese men, elderly Chinese women tend to be the key interface with the host society, but they are not isolated: indeed, they have thick social relations within their ethnic networks (Wang & Schwartz, 2016). Another qualitative study with a managerial focus on the social economy, carried out with about twenty elderly members of a

Franco-Chinese organization in Paris, indicates their lack of knowledge about how French society generally function, the increase in their expectations of organizational activities, and their desire to grow old in France (Lui, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic presents a novel, unprecedented context in which to analyze the living conditions and experiences of elderly Chinese who live on Île-de-France. In this chapter, we answer some questions concerning elderly Chinese, focusing on the first stage of the pandemic in France (from January to October 2020). How do social disruptions and discontinuities induced and imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, especially lockdowns, affect their daily life? How do they use digital tools—in particular, smartphones and WeChat—in the pandemic context? How do the pandemic and its perception alter the relationship of elderly Chinese to public space and, more broadly, to the living society? Is their relationship with their country of origin changing?

To answer these questions, we rely on an empirical survey and participant observations among people of Chinese origin over the age of sixty, who emigrated from mainland China or Southeast Asia and in the Île-de-France region. We conducted this research as part of a collective research project as well as the activities of an organization in Paris that offers support to these elderly migrants. This chapter analyzes the reconfiguration of four types of social ties that they maintained—with their families, among peers, with the living society, and with their country of origin—during the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, we refer to Serge Paugam's (2018) conceptual framework of social ties, which distinguishes four types of social ties: affiliation, electoral participation, organic participation, and citizenship. In our study, considering that these elderly people are retired, we do not discuss their organic participation ties, as they relate to the working world. Moreover, because this study concerns immigrants who live between the country of origin and the host country, we draw a distinction in particular in terms of their citizenship ties.

This chapter is based on two sets of empirical data, collected in two studies between January and October 2020. First, as part of the research project *MigraChiCovid*, we conducted ten semistructured interviews with elderly people of Chinese origin, in parallel with quantitative data collected on twenty-two elderly people (twelve women and ten men) through an online questionnaire. Second, acting as mediators and the association's president, we observed the participants in various settings with the CFFC association.<sup>2</sup> Since December

2 Since 2015, the CFFC has concentrated most of its efforts on activities for Chinese retirees. The project *Accompanying, Supporting and Valuing the Elderly in Chinese Populations* (*Accompagner, soutenir, et valoriser les personnes âgées issues des populations chinoises*) was created with public funding. It aims to promote social ties among communities of

2019, we have spent approximately thirteen hours a week with these elderly in various activities: French language classes, digital workshops, information and discussion meetings, medical appointments, and cultural and sports events. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, these activities had been held exclusively online; at the end of lockdown in May 2020, they have been held in a hybrid in-person or online format. In addition, a group was created on WeChat, a Chinese social media platform, and nearly 150 elderly members of the CFFC and volunteers (including a mediator and the president) joined it. Using this WeChat group, we conducted online observations and an ethnography of the population studied who participated on their smartphone or tablet.

## 2 Profiles and Specificities of the Elderly Chinese Studied

A majority of the population studied whom we met live in Belleville, which is designated as a “Priority Neighborhood in City Policy” (*Quartier Prioritaire de la Politique de la Ville*) located at the crossroads of four districts in Paris. Among the 150 members who participated at least once in a CFFC activity, 75 percent were sixty to seventy years old, and the other 25 percent were over seventy. Few members were age eighty and over. The association members estimated a low proportion of men, 15–20 percent, indicating the predominance of female participation. In general, the elderly members of the association have had relatively little schooling, and the majority dropped out after middle school.

At the same time, some of the twenty elderly respondents interviewed and surveyed in the MigraChiCovid project are members of the CFFC. Most of them (18) were born outside France and are not French citizens, and only a few (4) are naturalized French citizens. More than half (12) of the respondents arrived in France between the late 1970s and the 1990s. Their average age is sixty-seven. The oldest respondent is eighty-four years old. Among the respondents, eleven obtained a high-school diploma, eight have a bachelor’s-degree education, and two others completed a two years of secondary education. In general, all the respondents, CFFC members as well as respondents in the MigraChiCovid project, are live independently, and none live at a care facility (*établissements d’hébergement pour personnes âgées dépendantes*, or EHPAD, retirement/nursing home, etc.).

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“invisible” elderly, to encourage them to engage in various physical and cognitive activities, to facilitate access to their rights, and to establish closer links and support for them in health-care services.

The social profiles of these seniors are fairly homogeneous. Most of them regularized their legal status in France only after about ten years of permanent residency in the country. With some exceptions, their professional career in France remained largely in the clothing or the restaurant industries, within Chinese networks. Their language skills in French, even after living in France for thirty or forty years, remain rudimentary.

These newcomer migrants are largely retired. Because they worked for low wages and only a short period, with relatively little contribution to the pension system, the vast majority receive a modest pension, supplemented by a “solidarity allowance” for the elderly (*allocation de solidarité aux personnes âgées*, or ASPA). Nevertheless, some of the respondents opened a small business or purchased property in Belleville, which was still affordable for the working class twenty years ago (Paris Notaires Services, 2021, 3). Another aspect of this relative homogeneity is their regional origin. The vast majority of the respondents come from Zhejiang Province, more precisely from Wenzhou. Many of the respondents know one another. Finally, a key characteristic of these elderly people is their use of digital technologies. In contrast to the study on the digital exclusion of elderly people by the organization “*Petits Frères des Pauvres*” (Little Brothers of the Poor) in June 2020 (2020, 15), which estimated that 27 percent of the people over age sixty never use the internet, we found the use of mobile phones for internet access among the population widespread. This democratization was largely achieved through WeChat, driven by individual contacts, discussion groups, personal pages, and news posts. This particularity should not be ignored as we try to understand the way in which the social ties studied here are structured.

Here we present the results of our study, distinguishing three types of social ties maintained between January and October 2020 by the elderly respondents with family members, peers, and French society. The fourth type of social ties—those with their country of origin—is omnipresent and interacts intrinsically with the other three types of social ties and is thus discussed transversally, within and across the following sections.

### 3 Reconfiguration of Family Ties: between Discrepancy and Intergenerational Solidarity

#### 3.1 *Discrepancy between Generations in the Interpretation of the Health Crisis*

When multigenerational families live under the same roof, the different generations may have different points of view regarding the risk of the virus and the

Covid-19 pandemic and, consequently, on the protective measures that should be adopted. For example, before the first lockdown in spring 2020, some children wanted to protect their parents by bringing them to the countryside for self-isolation, whereas the latter experience the stay in the countryside as a constraint or even seclusion.

The case of the Zhang family illustrates this protective intention of the descendants. Mrs. Zhang, who is sixty-eight years old, has lived alone in an apartment in the nineteenth arrondissement in Paris for the past four years. Her four children are all restaurant managers in southeastern France. During the lockdown, one of her sons picked her up and took her on a five-hour drive so that she could spend the lockdown near her relatives.<sup>3</sup> Hence, from her son's point of view, Mrs. Zhang would enjoy staying with her children and grandchildren in a village in southeastern France. But she felt forced to adjust her daily lifestyle to one that was not of her own choosing: moreover, she had to accept a ban on going out demanded by her son, which she quietly transgressed. On May 17, 2020, after two months of living with them, Mrs. Zhang returned to her studio in Paris. Even though she was alone in Paris, her children asked her not to go outside.

After the lockdown in the city ended, she felt uneasy and went to see her doctor in June 2020, who diagnosed her with depression. She told us:

In March, I went to live at my son's home, because he said it would be better for me, and the kids were staying at home as well. I enjoyed it for two months. It was nice to be with them, but it's better to be alone and free.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

During the interview, Mrs. Zhang smoothed over the tension she feels with her children, who, in the name of good health for herself and the entire family, limited her freedom to go outside. At the same time, as a mother and grandmother, she appreciated the time with her children during the lockdown. In the end, it was her body that "spoke": the diagnosis of depression she received suggests that the children's protective intention could just as well have led to her distress.

The discrepancy between the generations in the perception of the Covid-19 crisis and of the measures needed to protect themselves from infection, was also manifested in the opposite direction. Retired parents wanted their children to go out less and wear masks beginning in January and February 2020,

3 During the first lockdown, 4% of those age sixty-five and over lived away from their usual address in France; see Lambert et al. (2020), 17.

whereas the children preferred to follow the guidelines implemented by the French government at the time, according to which wearing a mask was not necessary.

Sylvie, born in France to Chinese parents, said that she faced pressure from her parents to stop working in the medical sector; her parents considered that her job was “dangerous” and exposed her to infection with Covid-19. She then said that her parents expressed anxiety throughout the period before the 2020 lockdown. In the same way, another descendant of Chinese origin asked his sister not to tell their parents that he was working at a special center for Covid-19 patients. He explains this secrecy in terms of different perceptions of the disease by his parents and his siblings; according to him, these differences are due to the fact that his parents receive information exclusively from Chinese television and therefore do not understand the reactions to the pandemic by the French authorities and French citizens.

The different perception across generations of the Covid-19 pandemic reflects the tensions between the elderly Chinese and the descendants, fueling intrafamily discussions and causing a reconfiguration of family dynamics. Moreover, the lockdown encouraged more frequent contacts between the elderly people and their relatives in China, to catch up and to check on their health. Their migratory status (between two societies) enabled them to compare the measures taken in France and in China, based on the belief that the latter was ahead in terms of knowledge about the virus, given that it appeared first there. The practices adopted by family members in the country of origin serve as references for those living in France, who thus take precautions that were not addressed there.

### 3.2 *Intergenerational Solidarity in Confronting the Health Crisis*

In other families, the Covid-19 pandemic may have brought the household together and strengthened intergenerational solidarity. In a crisis, family members helped one another to stock up on masks, food, hand sanitizer, or preventive medicine. Furthermore, some respondents benefited from the help of their children, who explained the settings and the functions of digital devices—smartphones, tablets, and computers—to the elderly.

This solidarity is often initiated by the children and accepted by the parents. Moreover, the children ask their elderly parents to avoid crowded places, spare them from running errands, and arrange food delivery to them. For parents who live alone, contact via phone or WeChat with children or siblings in France or elsewhere was more regular than usual (*Petits frères des pauvres*, 2020, p. 16).

In some cases, beyond the intergenerational solidarity, tensions might emerge or be amplified in relations between the elderly and their children and

grandchildren during the Covid-19 pandemic, because of their socialization and very different frames of reference. When things go wrong with their family, the seniors in question find a kind of mutual understanding and solidarity with their peers. Hence, the circle of friends becomes a place of solace. The ties among peers thus are important for affirming a sense of community and solidarity. In addition, through the discussions and exchanges in the WeChat group, elderly migrants confirm their established ideas about the health crisis and the protective measures that they are willing to take. This sociability with peers suggests a distinction between the Chinese respondents and the elderly in the general French population, who, according to the Life in Lockdown survey (VICO, *La Vie en Confinement*), are more oriented toward their family, rather than friendships, and who experienced an amplified feeling of isolation during the first lockdown (Mariot et al., 2021).

## 4 Strengthened Peer Ties and the Central Role of WeChat

### 4.1 *Physical Activities in Decline and Virtual Sociability*

By the end of January 2020, in-person activities organized by the CFFC—dance class, cultural events, workshops, French lessons, and so on—had stopped. The weak ties maintained by the elderly with the host society, through their outings in Belleville and their participation in the association's workshops (e.g., theater training, dancing, gymnastics, digital workshop and training) and various activities (trips outside Paris, screening and Covid-19 vaccination campaigns, etc.), deteriorated because of the pandemic and the national lockdowns. After the lockdowns were lifted, the CFFC wanted to restart in-person activities as soon as possible, though it was not easy to motivate the elderly to leave their homes. Indeed, during the pandemic, the CFFC acted as a mediator and a bridge between these older immigrants and the host society, through activities and senior empowerment actions.

The decrease in in-person and physical activity at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by an increase in relationships and exchanges online. From spring to autumn 2020, the elderly discovered the benefits of using WeChat for entertainment, information, and overcoming isolation. They thus maintain sociability and strengthen mutual social support through WeChat. This digital tool not only enables communication via its text and voice messenger functions but also combines features of a portal and a news aggregator (Deuze, 2003; Rebillard, 2006)—turning it into an information medium (Marty et al., 2012). Through its networking and communication power, the social network helps to maintain and strengthen interpersonal ties in times of



physical distancing (Licoppe, 2002). WeChat is the communication tool most used across the Chinese diaspora worldwide (Sun & Yu, 2022).

The group discussion on WeChat, initially created by the CFFC before Covid-19 with the objective of spreading information about its activities, has become a unique for connecting and assembling about a hundred elderly members at the time of the pandemic. To overcome fear of Covid-19 and alleviate daily loneliness, elderly members of the CFFC connect on the network throughout the day. The network continuous and connected presence (Licoppe, 2002) fills the void caused by the lack of physical contact. Many elderly people told us in the interviews: “My time online increased a lot during the [first] lockdown.” During the lockdown, WeChat became the main tool for Chinese elderly migrants to use in maintaining contact and activities. Furthermore, WeChat was used by the CFFC as a tool of social and medical mediation between elderly migrants and the French government. These ties would not have been possible to maintain without these digital tools.

#### 4.2 *WeChat as a Place to Strengthen the Sense of Belonging*

By observing discussion threads in the WeChat group, we can see that the elderly often have the same sources of information—in terms of media provenance. We find duplication and a lack of diversity in media viewpoints (see Chapter 1). This reality reflects the relative homogeneity of their migratory profiles and experiences (first-generation migrants who are often unskilled and immigrate to France for economic reasons, many of them from Wenzhou) and the social function of information sharing as a way to strengthen feelings of belonging (Bidart, 2021; Wang, 2022).

In a context in which elderly Chinese migrants often feel marginalized and excluded from the host society because of their lack of French language skills, they can feel solidarity with one another against the Covid-19 pandemic in this virtual universe. The study conducted by Pan et al. (2021) in Belgium and the Netherlands shows that the increase in nonphysical contacts via mobile phones and social networks by Chinese elderly does not necessarily protect against loneliness during the Covid-19 health crisis. Yet, given that the elderly Chinese migrants in our study often already know one another and have geographic proximity in originating from the same region in China and living in the vast Belleville neighborhood, the use of WeChat contributes significantly to the development of social support (Figeac et al., 2021).

#### 4.3 *Sharing Health Remedies Online and Relativizing Life and Happiness*

Between April and October 2020, approximately 1,200 messages were posted by the CFFC’s WeChat discussion group every month. We find that only about

a dozen of the 150 members are responsible for the vast majority of the messages posted and information shared. We also find that they share information regularly at the same time of the day. This is illustrated by the case of Mrs. Li, who posts an article about the philosophy of life every morning at 7:00 am. The majority of the other members of the group remain silent without intervening, participating in this new trend toward “remote sociability” (Figeac et al., 2021). Some respondents also talk about the benefits of the WeChat group as a place of psychological support. We note that these respondents consider themselves simply “passive” (inactive) and do not post or react to the group discussions.

Tracking the content shared by the group, we find that health issues are the most discussed subject in the chats. Philosophical reflections on happiness, its fulfillment, life, and human virtue are also heavily represented topics. During the first lockdown period (March–May 2020), messages addressing these issues showed the relativity of happiness. Happiness, life, and humanity were considered in light of the health crisis, with an emphasis on happiness in every moment, the meaning of life, focusing on what is truly important, and resilience in hard times. After the first lockdown, we observe a significant decrease in daily information on the evolution of the pandemic and on the number of daily infections. Nevertheless, health information about remedies and advice on how to protect oneself continue to be posted as summer begins and outings are permitted.

On the topic of health, many elderly people share nutritional recommendations that they followed to boost their immune system against the virus. Mr. and Mrs. Qiu, who are seventy-six and eighty-two years old respectively, recount that when they both felt ill in the middle of the first lockdown, they could not seek help in the French health-care system because they do not speak French. So they decided to try the “remedies” they read about on WeChat, in particular a remedy consisting of a garlic decoction combined with acetaminophen.

In this way, ties between peers are forged and maintained through their involvement with the association (Caradec, 2001), which is geared toward retirees (Guillemard, 2002). Through the association activities, the Chinese retirees show the desire to seek meaning in their existence by establishing ties with French society.

## 5 Discrepancy with French Society and Reinforced Identification with a Chinese Model of Pandemic Management

### 5.1 *Warned and Protected Earlier than the Rest of the French Population*

The discrepancy in attitudes about the virus and the pandemic between the elderly Chinese population and the French general population before the first

national lockdown were evident in our observations. This gap is particularly clear in the adoption of protective measures, especially the wearing of masks. (see Chapter 2). In our study, 86 percent of the elderly respondents report having worn a mask in public before March 16, 2020, compared with 68 percent of the respondents under age thirty. At that time, hardly any French people wore masks in public, and the French government began to encourage the wearing of masks only in April 2020.

The beginning of February 2020 was characterized by an increase in racist attacks on people of Asian origin. In many cases, these attacks were motivated by the fact that the victims wore protective masks. Therefore, the Regional Health Agency (*Agence Régionale de Santé*, ARS) published a statement that people of Asian origin regard wearing a protective mask as a basic safety measure and, above all, a gesture of consideration for others (ARS IDF, 2020). It is worth recalling that, as of February 3, 2020, only six Covid-19 cases had been reported in France, no chain of infection had been identified, and the general director of health declared that the general public did not need to take any protective measures. The social distancing measures did not mention face masks.

Mrs. Tang's statements reflect the discrepancy she experienced at that time: "At first, I would wear the mask discreetly, hiding, because I was too afraid of mockery and insults from others. I was afraid they would accuse me of being ill!"

Not only did the mask wearing illustrate this gap in the perception of risk experienced by the Chinese elderly population compared to the French population, but the feeling of stress reported by them is also an indicator of their perception of the disease, which was very different from that of the general population. "Stressed," "sleeping problems," "anxiety," "sleepless nights," "glued to the mobile phone all the time to check updated numbers" were all expressed frequently by the respondents when describing their experiences in the period between January and mid-March 2020 (see Chapter 3).

Indeed, by constantly broadcasting news on the health crisis in China, on the concurrent numbers of confirmed cases and deaths, and on the Chinese cities closed to outsiders during January and February, WeChat and other Chinese media contributed to the creation and reinforcement of fear of the virus and of the risk of infection from going outside. By relying almost exclusively on these Chinese media sources, the Chinese elderly thus reacted as if they were living in China.

After February 2020, only half the regular participants continued to attend the French classes organized by the association; and social support services, mainly used by the elderly, reported a sharp decline in activity. Among the

people surveyed in the online questionnaire, 95 percent of the elderly had started to go out less before the lockdown. The preventive attitude was patterned after the lockdowns employed in China. Stockpiling food and isolation were observed among the respondents at a time when the infectiousness of the virus was still unknown.

When the first lockdown in France was imposed, Chinese elders followed the government's instructions strictly and applied it "in a Chinese way": strict confinement, during which the interviewees went outside only rarely or not at all. Similarly, others never had to complete the self-certification that was required for outings according to the regulations by the French authorities. Based on our observations during the spring 2020 lockdown in Belleville, we note the total absence of elderly people of Chinese origin in public, in contrast to the continued presence of those in other ethnic groups.

Mrs. Zhou is a seventy-four-year-old living in Belleville. Her statement about going to a medical appointment reveals as well the influence of images of the Chinese lockdown that shaped her apprehension of the outside world—which did not match the reality of the lockdown as experienced by other residents in her neighborhood. Indeed, she states that she was surprised at the number of people in the streets, in contrast to the images from China of unending police restrictions and very few pedestrians.

This leads us to believe that the media consumption of elderly Chinese people, especially the consumption of information via WeChat and Chinese television channels, initiated the interruption of all sociability in public as well as an increasingly critical view of the French government's management of the pandemic.

## 5.2 *Critical Discourse about the French Government in Managing the Health Crisis*

According to the respondents, the end of the first national lockdown in the spring of 2020 did not mean a return to normality. Many of them continued their isolation because, for them, the severity of the pandemic in France was measured through the prism of indicators of conditions in China.

When, in the summer of 2020, China started to report no new infections on a daily basis, France was still experiencing an increase in new cases and deaths. In that context, Chinese elderly continued to follow information from both France and China. They were particularly concerned about the data on the evolution of the pandemic, mainly the number of new infections and deaths. For them, China was the frame of reference on management of the pandemic, and the French authorities needed to follow its example in order to achieve

total control of the spread of the virus and severely decrease the number of infections and deaths.

The sense of belonging in Chinese society, coupled with the feeling of a profound discrepancy with the host society in the representation of Covid-19, fostered a rather critical discourse regarding the measures implemented by the French government. The criticism of the laxity of French authorities in management of the pandemic is mirrored by the emphasis and the enthusiasm in the description of China's success in the fight against Covid-19. The sense of belonging is clearly reinforced by the content on WeChat. In addition to faulting the way in which French authorities managed the pandemic, the elderly Chinese also criticized some individual behavior by the French population, such as not wearing masks and disregarding social distancing, viewing it as a "lack of civic-mindedness" and as "irresponsible." Some respondents also claimed that, at this time of health restrictions, people in China had greater "freedom" than those in France.

According to them, in contrast to the total freedom of movement across China permitted by Chinese authorities in June 2020, in European countries, people continued to face travel restrictions, and France, after controlling circulation of the virus in the spring of 2020, imposed another national lockdown in October 2020.

In conclusion, the global pandemic put these elderly migrants in a position as spectators in two societies: their society of origin and the living society. On the one hand, their perception of the pandemic conditions in China was mainly based on information on Chinese mass media, notably television, which is an important pastime and a principal source of information for a large proportion of the elderly people interviewed, and a Chinese social network, that is, WeChat. On the other hand, their perception of the evolution of the pandemic in France was fueled by their individual experiences and by videos recorded and shared by friends in WeChat groups.

### 5.3 *The Distinction between the Elderly Chinese Diasporas from Southeast Asia and from Mainland China*

The disengagement from social life was evident again in September 2020, when another wave of the virus began. However, the majority of elderly Chinese people with roots in Southeast Asian countries kept participating in organizational activities, in-person French lessons, digital workshops, and outdoor activities. Compared with the members from mainland China, this group represents only a small portion of the CFFC.

Why were people in the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora less discouraged by the increase in infections in the autumn of 2020? The interviews point again

to the influence of official Chinese media, which tended to instill fear in their audience. Elderly Chinese from the mainland mainly relied for their information on Chinese official media, which described the virus as extremely dangerous and strongly encouraged the public to avoid any outdoor activity. Because of their previous intra-Asian migration, the elderly Chinese from Southeast Asian countries, however, are relatively detached from the official discourse of the Chinese government and media. Moreover, they are more proficient in French than those from mainland China and more receptive to information in the French media; thus they tend to cross-reference information from China and France and emphasize the need for learning to live with Covid-19, without giving up their lifestyle. Thus, unlike the elderly from mainland China, they continued to go out and to participate in the activities of the organization, yet still attentive to protective measures, such as going to some public places when they were less crowded and practicing social distancing.

## 6 Conclusion

The social ties of the elderly of Chinese origin in France were significantly reshaped in the first ten months of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the one hand, family ties were marked by intergenerational solidarity: mutual assistance and reverse transmission. On the other hand, they were characterized by a gap in representation of the disease and in risk perception between respondents and their descendants. This gap led to different attitudes about the adoption of protective measures and to intergenerational tensions, especially in households with several generations under one roof.

Despite the reduction in physical contact and in-person organized activities, elderly Chinese developed and maintained peer ties through the use of WeChat. Online exchanges with their peers and members of organizations helped them to fight against isolation and loneliness and to relieve everyday stress and fear of the disease. Moreover, daily exchanges with one another and with the organization's volunteers helped them to put life and happiness into perspective and to build a sense of belonging among peers that compensated for conflicts they experienced in family relations.

As the pandemic progressed, this population of elderly Chinese, which was already marginalized, became increasingly distant from the host society. During the first lockdown from March to May 2020, the elderly Chinese became almost completely invisible in public because they had engaged in self-quarantine as a protective measure against infection starting in January/February 2020, having followed news on Chinese media. Moreover, many of

these elderly Chinese respondents adopted a critical view of French authorities because of their management of the health crisis. However, a distinction emerged between two Chinese-speaking groups from different Asian regions, mainly elderly Chinese from mainland China and those from Southeast Asian countries. This difference is manifested in their different relationship with French society and their country of origin, China.

In general, elderly Chinese from the mainland, despite the great physical distance, enhanced by international travel restrictions, maintained strong ties with their country of origin in particular through the consumption of Chinese official media and Chinese social media. The respondents kept informed about Chinese management of the health crisis through Chinese official media, which reinforced a nationalistic attitude. This attitude in turn led them to strongly criticize French management of the pandemic and to praise the measures taken by the Chinese authorities. We also find that the respondents suffered from the inability to return to China: indeed, emotional ties to distant family and the country of origin were reinforced during the health crisis.

Finally, the use of smartphones reinforced their capacity for action (Gucher, 2012). Digital technology played a major role in maintaining and reshaping the social ties of these elderly Chinese in France during the Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic inevitably accelerated the breakdown in social relations and presents a challenge for organizations that offer comprehensive support for the elderly. In this sense, Covid-19 led to the emergence of new channels of care for the Chinese elderly, particularly with digital tools. Digital technologies were also essential levers for organizational activities and will inevitably change everyday work in social-medical and cultural mediation and empowerment. At the same time, the use of digital technology can also lead to exclusion and cannot replace physical contact and social ties forged in face-to-face interaction. Moreover, it is more important than ever to examine the support and resources offered by local communities (Pihet & Viriot-Durandal, 2009) and institutions—including organizations—during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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# Disruption in Study Abroad during the Pandemic: Chinese Students in France

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## Abstract

This chapter examines the disruptive effect of Covid-19 on different aspects of the lives of Chinese students studying in France: their studies, daily life, employment, and migratory trajectories. First, the transition to distance learning during the first phases of the pandemic had contrasting effects on the learning processes of respondents: negative for some and beneficial for others, depending on the student's field of study, level of study, and living conditions. The clearest negative effects, however, are seen with respect to their student experience, which was harmed by their inability to explore their geography and to develop social relationships with other students. Second, at a pivotal moment, recent graduates found their careers derailed by the arrival of Covid-19. The duration of this derailment depended on their training and their personal conditions, reflecting the effect of existing inequality. They developed strategies for adapting to the new conditions, which included making some concessions. Third, looking back over time enables authors to better understand the ways in which these students constructed migratory paths based on the evolution of the pandemic, by evaluating the risks and prioritizing their objectives. The health considerations that seemed overwhelming at the beginning of the pandemic gradually gave way to other, more general concerns, such as economic security, professional success, and personal independence.

## Keywords

Chinese students in France – migrants – Covid-19 – pandemic – disruptive effect – study broad – experiences – training – career – inequality – living conditions – migratory trajectories – strategies – health – professional success

## 1 Introduction

In 2020, when Europe became the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of Chinese students in France to pursue higher education dropped 40 percent (Lenormand et al., 2021). International mobility data on Chinese students suggests that many young Chinese people postponed or changed their study-abroad plans, altering their international mobility patterns. Moreover, the pandemic had a strong impact on the lived experience of those who remained abroad for their studies.

In this chapter, we analyze that experience. We first examine Chinese students' experience in studying abroad during the pandemic—in particular, the responses, strategies, and arrangements that they developed to cope with disruption in their studies. Then, we discuss the post-graduation paths of Chinese graduates, focusing on their decisions about returning to their home countries or remaining in France.

The chapter addresses a series of questions: how did the pandemic call into question certain beliefs linked to studying abroad—for example, the goals of personal enrichment and cross-cultural exchanges? How did Chinese students adapt to the health crisis by maintaining their original goals while giving meaning to their experience in France? How the pandemic affects the mobility trajectory of students, and the migratory trajectory of those who planned to stay abroad after graduation? How did Chinese students respond to the emerging forms of studying abroad that combine spatial mobility and immobility, in-person courses, and distance learning? We also focus on the study conditions for Chinese students under the pandemic, as they are the core of their overseas experience.

We address these questions in the light of a first literature stream on the impact of Covid-19 on Chinese students who went to different countries for their studies. This literature explores the identity and sense of belonging of Chinese students in a world shaken by the crisis. These works analyze the ways in which Chinese students negotiate their multiple identities (Binah-Pollak & Yuan, 2022), experience racism and Sinophobia in their host countries (Haft & Zhou, 2021), and double exclusion, in both their host country and their country of origin. The second stream of literature focuses on the subjective experience of Chinese students in their daily lives, whether they are in China or abroad. These studies focus on the temporal experience of Chinese students who pursued their international studies while remaining in China (Wang B., 2021), the perception of risk in the pandemic (Zhu et al., 2020), preventive practices, and the mental health of Chinese students during the pandemic in their host countries (Cong et al., 2020; Ma & Miller, 2021). A third stream of the literature

focuses on the role of different networks of actors in organizing the international mobility or lack thereof of Chinese students. This work emphasizes transnational family ties and the online community, which played an important role in supporting Chinese students during the public health crisis when other institutional actors ceased to function as usual. As different countries took a largely state-centered approach in tackling the pandemic, state actors are retreating from the transnational social space (Vertovec, 2009). To help Chinese youth to travel back to China or remain abroad, Chinese families are no longer content to be mere users of institutional infrastructure but, rather, proactively participate in coordinating or bridging the activities of disconnected institutions (e.g., airlines, border authorities, and commercial agents). This family-mediated infrastructure process also entails an emotional double bind, which requires members of transnational families to strategically display emotional engagement and detachment in complex ways (Hu et al., 2020).

These growing streams of literature, however, include little research that draws attention to the ways in which the pandemic affected Chinese students' study conditions. Moreover, little has been written about the ways in which Chinese students' experiences during the pandemic have affected their long-term migration plans, including their decision about whether to return to their home country. Our chapter is an attempt to fill this gap. We begin with a discussion of study abroad.

## 2 Studying the Diverse Experiences of Chinese Students in France during the Pandemic

China has experienced a surge in study abroad since it eased restrictions on self-funded overseas education in the 1990s (Biao, 2003). Young Chinese remain fascinated in study abroad, making China the world's largest sending country of international students. In general, study abroad combines the accumulation of cultural, symbolic, and social capital through international education that can be transformed into economic capital, in that it allows them to acquire skills that can be capitalized on the job market. Through their studies and cross-cultural experiences abroad, young Chinese also fulfill a desire to become educated, open-minded, international, and cosmopolitan. A discussion of study abroad is reminiscent of a discussion of *suzhi* (a person's good education or cultural quality), a concept that the well-connected urban middle classes in China hold dear (Hanser, 2008).

However, the pandemic has put study abroad into question at two levels. First, the public health crisis strongly disrupted students' overseas study plans.

In France, in the second semester of the 2019–2020 academic year, courses were taught online or simply canceled, exams and dissertation defenses were postponed, and conferences, workshops, and experiments disappeared from the curriculum (Belghith et al., 2020). The collective experience of young Chinese was suddenly and dramatically altered. Alain Coulon (2005) calls the “job of being a student” an affiliation that presupposes socialization and an interaction with one’s social environment. Without this interaction, what remains of the student’s affiliation?

Second, and more generally, since the outbreak of the pandemic, the foreign experience has lost its substance. Questions are raised about the point of going to study in France if young people are forced to be confined in their homes, deprived of cultural outings, unable to frequent bars, museums, live theaters, and movie theaters. Mobility abroad involves a hierarchy of space, endowing individuals who return to their home country with higher status because of their sojourn in places that are considered more modern (Liu, 1997; Wagner, 2007). As the pandemic raged throughout France, France was perceived as a risky country by many Chinese students and their families and the ability of the French government to contain the spread of the coronavirus was questioned. In addition, an increase in acts of anti-Asian violence as well as discourse in France occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Chapter 10). Did the pandemic experience, as well as the direct or indirect experience with racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, lead young Chinese to radically change their perceptions of France and, consequently, their own self-image and their evaluation of their experience in France?

The Chinese student population in France is heterogeneous (Li, 2020; Wang S., 2021), and so were the experiences of Chinese students during the pandemic, depending on students’ field of study, level of study, and educational institution. Professional projects and housing conditions influenced students’ lockdown experiences (Launay & Grossetti, 2020): for some, it was a constraint, whereas for others it was an opportunity to explore other ways of learning. Furthermore, young Chinese abroad may develop various kinds of ties with the host society, including friendship and marital, professional, and emotional relationships during their study and after their graduate, especially when they take paid work or marry the locals and move to a different legal status (Li & Wang, 2021). A study by Yang et al. (2021) on the decision of Chinese students and researchers to return to China stresses the existence of these considerations as well as the importance of health risk considerations, which kept the informants on British soil.

This chapter emphasizes the need to consider the variety of logics of action, and their intersection, to understand the decision-making processes of Chinese

students and graduates in France regarding their decision to remain there or return to their country of origin. The research sample consists of Chinese students currently enrolled in the French system of higher education, as well as graduates, who completed their university studies in France in 2020 and 2021. These two graduating classes are the first to make decisions about work, further study, and migration in the context of Covid-19. We interviewed a total of seven men and fifteen women. Most of these interviewees has participated in the MigraChiCovid survey (online questionnaire, interview), except three (Alice, Emma, Tom) who are recruited and interviewed by the second author through her personal networks. Although there is an overrepresentation in our sample of students in the social sciences and the humanities and graduates of Sciences Po (*Institut d'Etudes Politiques*, IEP), the profiles of our respondents vary enough to show the diversity of student conditions and experiences during the pandemic. Our respondents are between twenty-one and thirty-three years old. Most of them arrived in France at the end of the 2010s and paid for their studies themselves. Most of them are also graduate students (see the interviewees' sociodemographic characteristics in Appendix Table 7.1). Because of the practical constraints on meeting in person in the context of the pandemic, many of our interviews were conducted remotely, either by phone or via WeChat, a social networking platform.

Our study also pays particular attention to the temporal dimension of Chinese students' experiences during the pandemic. As Bingyu Wang (2021, 2022) notes, international study applicants who expected to enroll at universities abroad in 2020 were forced to remain in China. She shows that while staying put in China they encountered a series of temporal disruptions in both everyday life and their future plans. Her work demonstrates that the loss of routine, experience with stasis, and temporal dissonance with their peers all generated anxiety for the young Chinese she studied. This anxiety was exacerbated by the fact that progress in their future plans was affected by the pandemic. In France, the VICO survey shows that the restrictions imposed in the spring of 2020 led not only changes in the French people's relationship with time but also revealed and even accentuated social inequality among the French population in the dealing with time. More than the usual time, the temporal experience of the French is polarized according to their sociodemographic characteristics during the lockdown: some feel as if they don't have enough time, and others feel that the pace of life is slower (Paye, 2020). We therefore adopt a temporally sensitive approach in our study on the experience of Chinese students and graduates in France. Students' temporal experience must be understood in light of the life-course transitions that they experienced during their stay abroad. Their temporal experience must also be situated within the period

of the pandemic. At each stage in the pandemic's evolution, young Chinese experienced different feelings and emotions, at different intensities, linked to different concerns—for example, the acute fear of infection in February and March 2020 transitioned to concern about their future, during the “return to normal” in the summer of 2020. Our empirical material, which covers from May 2020 to the end of 2021, enables us to step back and understand the trajectories of our respondents, and how certain social logics resisted the global upheavals caused by Covid-19.

### 3 Studying during Covid-19: Impacts and Adaptation

#### 3.1 *Freedom of Movement between Home and Host Countries and Reorganization of the Curriculum*

In February and March 2020, because of the increase in Covid-19 infections in France as well as other European countries, Chinese students who were studying abroad faced the difficult decision of whether to return to their home country to avoid infection. Many rushed to return to China, where they were perceived as disease spreaders and sometimes suffered from feelings of exclusion. But it would be simplistic to describe these decisions to return home as the result of a collective panic. Our respondents who returned to China at the beginning of the pandemic did not always experience the return as traumatic. On the contrary, it was an opportunity to develop a new way of learning, which enabled them to reconcile health considerations and their professional projects, while remaining close to their family.

In March 2020, after the announcement of the lockdown in France, Tom, a master's-degree student at School of Knowledge Economy and Management (SKEMA) Business School (Paris) decided to return to China. Living with his parents, he participated in courses remotely for a month before finding a place at the Suzhou campus of SKEMA in August. He told us:

There is no option for my master's degree (in international human resources and performance management) at the Chinese campus, so I had to change my major, but I still prefer to remain in China. In fact, my school offered me three options: remain at the Paris campus, transfer to the Chinese campus, or take the courses online. I chose the second one. It was a decision made in consultation with my family. It is mainly for health reasons, but it is also linked to my professional plans. If it were not for Covid-19, I would have stayed in Paris.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020



Many young Chinese at French schools that offered “off-campus” training chose to relocate to Chinese campuses. Tom notes that about thirty Chinese students in his master’s-degree program made the same choice.

Another remarkable fact is that returning to China during Covid-19 is often thought of as temporary. By returning, some Chinese students were bowing to parental pressure, but they have not given up their plans to study abroad. This is the case for Alice, who finished her bachelor’s degree in international commerce at the ESCE Business School in July 2020. She would have started her master’s degree at the same school in September, but she gave in to parental pressure by asking for a gap year.

At first, I didn’t want to lose a year. I already lost two months during the lockdown, when online classes were poorly organized. But my parents begged me to stay in China. When I read the figures published every day on the number of infected people in France, I was finally “defeated by reality.”

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

However, Alice planned to be vaccinated in China and resume her studies in Paris, and after a year in China, she returned to Paris in September 2021 to pursue her master’s degree at the same school. Since May 2020, French higher education institutions, including the *grandes écoles*, have offered international students incentives for returning to the campus (Lombard-Latune, 2020). However, as shown below, because of the resurgence of the pandemic in Europe and the tightening of border controls at that time, resuming studies in Europe was not always easy.

Nonetheless, despite the outbreak of the public health crisis in France, most Chinese students remained in France to pursue their education. With the introduction of lockdowns and curfews, young Chinese experienced the loss of their usual reference points and were forced to adapt to new norms, such as social distancing and restrictions on travel. The narratives of our respondents differ based on their education background, their personal situation, and their migration plans.

The transition to online education, for example, was organized very differently at *grandes écoles* and universities. At the *grandes écoles*, such as Sciences Po, online teaching was set up very quickly, with students receiving prompt instructions and directions. Zoom accounts were set up for Sciences Po students two days after the French government announced a national lockdown. Students reported few technical difficulties in continuing their studies. Unlike the elite schools, French public universities struggled to adopt online

education after the lockdown began, which greatly disrupted the learning process for some students. Yan, a twenty-six-year-old master's-degree student in sociology at a public university in Montpellier, did not have any classes for four months. The experience of having her education disrupted led her to have doubts about the academic value of her diploma.

During the lockdown, my school was closed, and we didn't have any online software to attend class. The teacher emailed us some PowerPoints to read, but there were no classes. In September 2020, we switched to half online and half offline, but the online teachers occasionally canceled classes because of technical problems, and I don't have any confidence in my diploma even though I've now graduated and have a master's degree.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2020 AND  
DECEMBER 2021

The move to online education can have a significant impact on efficiency, outcomes, learning motivation, and educational relationships (Bès & Demonsant, 2020). This is especially true for science and engineering students. Lily, an engineering student, had numerous negative effects of Covid-19 on her studies. First, normally, engineering students have a lot of practical experience, which enables students to use the knowledge learned through in-class experiments and to understand its concrete applications in social practices and production. Because of the pandemic, all laboratory experiments were canceled. Lily, like her classmates, had to write reports based on existing experimental materials. The inability to get their hands on the tools and materials for experimentation not only reduces students' productivity—it took Lily more time than usual to complete a report—but also affects the development of practical engineering skills. Lily said: "Our knowledge is limited to theory. This is not good for an engineering education" (interview conducted in Chinese, February 2022). Second, unlike business or humanities students, whose courses are based on PowerPoint presentations, engineering students need the equations and graphs that their professors write on the board to better understand the course materials. They are deprived of this form of interaction if courses are taught on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Lily reported difficulty in understanding her professors, who had no experience in teaching online courses. When she missed certain technical terms, Lily did not dare to interrupt her teacher, nor could she ask her classmates for help. Deprived of contact with her French classmates, Lily could only do group work with her Chinese classmates. For these reasons, Lily became unmotivated during the pandemic. She was not accustomed to working independently. Without having a teacher's supervision, she had difficulty

concentrating on her studies. During the online classes, she often did other things.

Among humanities and social science students, reactions to the pandemic were mixed. Social distancing and travel restrictions prevented social science students from conducting fieldwork or forced them to opt for virtual encounters, which greatly reduces the potential for finding respondents and building strong relationships with interlocutors. Sarah (28, PhD student in sociology) stated:

Yes, the pandemic has had an impact on my studies. Before, when I wanted to do an interview, it was in person, just like now: real people to real people. But [during Covid], I was restricted from going out and had to work online, so some of the interviews that I had scheduled earlier were canceled. The people whom we interview online now were all recommended by other people from the previous face-to-face meetings; it is more difficult to get more recommendations for online subjects. In other words, it is more difficult to find new interviewees. After all, the trust that you build through an in-person relationship is different from the feeling in virtual space. In particular, when it comes to more personal information, it's much more reassuring to talk face-to-face.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

The most advanced students in their studies, for example, doctoral students, found that, aside from the constraints of accessing the field, their greatest difficulty was the inability to participate in conferences, especially those outside France, as this is a central part of their academic socialization and intellectual identity. Bing, a PhD student in sociology, did not participate in conferences in person for two years. He was ironic:

The biggest impact of the epidemic on my studies was that I did not have the usual habit of attending many conferences, and I gave up some preparatory work before my PhD studies. I often laughed at myself for being a PhD during the pandemic. In fact, many other students I know did suffer greatly, particularly in terms of the frequency and effectiveness of communication with supervisors, participation in academic seminars and socializing with colleagues, etc.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2022

But, as mentioned earlier, the effects of the pandemic were not completely negative. Going online had some benefits for students who prefer written rather than oral communication. This is the case for Fei, a twenty-four-year-old

sociology student at the Sorbonne, who had to write her master's research report with her French classmates. Because she is not a native French speaker, face-to-face discussion with her French colleagues is stressful for her, and taking notes is not easy. Having online meetings and working on a Google Doc enabled her to follow the discussions more easily and make better contributions to collective work.

Students whose training requires more introspection and independent work than data collection and contact with physical reality were hardly affected by the lockdowns. For example, Feng, a twenty-five-year-old student in a master's program in communication and translation in Paris, found studying at home more convenient than going to the school.

I think the future of translation and interpretation might be more online, so we have a chance to try it out and see how to do it later. I think it's normal to have more time for your own academic research, but I think I need more time to do what I want to do at home and learn to do what I want to do. For example, I also learned something new; I took classes on an online learning platform called Coursera and earned two certificates. When I had to go to the school, I wasted time commuting, so it was better to study at home because I had more time.

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During Covid-19, the sudden shift to distance learning was accompanied by significant changes in students' relationship to knowledge: rules became more blurred, and success depended more on individual autonomy. But the public health crisis also had a tremendous impact on the daily lives of young Chinese people and their relationships to others.

### 3.2 *Life during Covid—Emotions, Social Ties, and Temporal Experiences*

The students interviewed all experienced a loss of human contact with the living society: this included outings, meetings, trips, parties, and celebrations, making for a solitary student experience. Although Wenxi (twenty-five, arrived in France in 2014) thought her online courses at Sciences Po went quite well, she still felt as if something was lacking and missed being able to wear her nice clothes to school and greet her teachers and classmates. Her biggest regret was in being unable to celebrate the end of her master's degree with her classmates. "We said goodbye to each other when we turned off the camera. Nothing special happened that day" (Interview conducted in Chinese, February 2022).

Student life was further complicated by the fact that students had taken care of themselves during an unprecedented health crisis (Belghith et al., 2021). The hardest part was organizing their lives outside classes: those who

lived alone described a heavy atmosphere. Many told us about their experience in dealing with moods, stress, and fear. Some saw their student life reduced to monotony, in a little studio. Wenxi confided, "In my whole life, I have never spent so long alone in 16 square meters. There is a tree in front of my window. Every day I took a picture of it. In a few months, the tree, which was bare in winter, became very leafy in summer." Social isolation can greatly affect the motivation of young migrants, as well as their physical and mental health. Meng is a twenty-four-year-old studying film directing in Paris. She lives alone in a studio in Versailles. She describes her neighborhood as "very calm" and inhabited mostly by elderly French people. During the lockdown, she was alone in her studio: "I barely spoke for about two months, not even much Chinese. I felt as if I was in a state of aphasia."

In this context, we observed a tightening of existing family and friendship ties during the lockdowns, perhaps to fill this social and emotional void. Those who were close became distant, and those who were distant became close. Some students got back in touch with former classmates in China and their friends in other foreign countries. Wenxi, who is very social, could only rely on online communication during the lockdown. She spent a lot of time calling her friends and became close with a Chinese friend in Germany during this time. Wenxi regularly cooked and worked out while chatting online with her. In addition, contact with her parents became very important and is best described as "living together, separately." Wenxi's parents were concerned about the mental health of their only daughter abroad, so they called her every day, watched TV shows with her, and played mahjong with her online.

However, students' subjective experiences with the pandemic vary, depending on how they envisioned their stay in France (temporary or long-term, etc.), their housing conditions, social networks, and the nature and intensity of their ties to the living country. For students who planned to return to China immediately after their studies, the pandemic left a gap in their time in France that they could not recover. For example, Lily, who found a job in Montpellier and began working for a petroleum services and equipment company in October 2021 after graduating from an engineering school in Paris, regrets not having taken full advantage of her stay in Paris. She thought about all the missed opportunities to meet new friends, about her canceled trips. Her experience in Paris is missing something: "It's a shame that my two years of living in Paris was spent in a pandemic."

We did not see this kind of regret among Chinese students who planned to remain in France after their completing their studies. These students project themselves into a long-time frame that is not limited to the duration of their residence permit, especially since the French government extended the

residence permits of foreign students that expired between March 16 and June 15, 2020, for a period of six months. Rather, the lockdown period gave them time to rest, reconnect, and explore new opportunities for learning and leisure. Often, these graduates formed marital ties or romantic relationships with natives in the living country. They did not feel very confined during the lockdown.

For example, Feng, who is in a relationship with a young Frenchman of Chinese descent, plans to start a family in France. During the lockdown, she considered her life in Paris full. "I live with him, and our apartment is quite big, 45 square meters, so I am quite comfortable at home. I had plants, and I was home every day. I had a few online classes, and I thought all things would come to an end, that it would end soon. I wasn't that nervous."

## 4 Confronting the Job Market during the Pandemic

### 4.1 *An Unlucky Generation?*

Many Chinese students see working in France as an integral part of their study-abroad plans, as they want to gain professional experience at French companies during or after their university studies, which is valuable in the Chinese job market. However, Covid-19 greatly disrupted their access to employment and internships.

In particular, this disruption concerns the classes of 2020 and 2021, which had their first experiences in the French job market during the public health crisis. Of all the graduates in France, those from the *grandes écoles* are the best tracked, thanks to the regular surveys of the *Conférence des Grandes Écoles* (CGE), which interviews graduates of the 193 *grandes écoles* in France six months after their graduation. According to the results of the 2021 survey on the labor market integration of graduates in the class of 2020, the health crisis had a clear impact on young graduates (Allain & Bouyer, 2021). The net employment rate less than six months after graduation is 79.1 percent compared with 88.1 percent for the class of 2019, knowing it was 76.5 % during the subprime crisis. The impacts were manifested in multiple ways. Among the respondents, regardless of their field of study, 59.9 percent stated that they had resorted to telework, 54.6 percent said that they had received fewer job offers, 19.1 percent had lowered their salary expectations, and 16.6 percent had encountered difficulty in their final internship. In this global landscape, we can posit that Chinese graduates, like other foreign graduates, experienced even greater disruption because of their status as foreigners. Being subjected to French immigration policies, as well as the ethnic and racial discrimination

they might encounter from French employers, makes them more vulnerable in seeking employment and less able to negotiate with their future employers.

Many of the graduates in the class of 2021 experienced the negative effects of the pandemic in 2020 during their studies and their search for an internship and then again in 2021 during their job search, when the effects of the crisis were still being felt.

Lily's biggest concern was not the lockdown, but the internship and job search. Because they attended a prestigious engineering school, Lily and her Chinese classmates never thought they would face so many difficulties in their search for an internship.

During the lockdown period, I wasn't particularly stressed because it wasn't a problem that couldn't be solved, and I didn't feel as if it would last long. But I encountered a lot of difficulties in finding an internship. Because of the pandemic, many of my classmates' offers were canceled. Many people did not get internships. Finally, I found a remote internship in Montpellier—otherwise, I would have had nothing. I started looking for a job in February 2021. The job search was very stressful, and the job market hadn't recovered very much.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

Many in the class of 2020 struggled to navigate the health crisis. They graduated in June 2020, experiencing the full impact of the pandemic. Many had to alternate between internships and periods of unemployment and did not find steady employment until 2021. The shock of Covid-19 on the labor market was first reflected in the severe reduction in job offers, as mentioned above. In the face of uncertainty, many companies froze their recruitment plans. Covid-19 also wreaked havoc on traditional job search channels and weakened institutional support normally available during a job search.

Wenxi, finished her master's degree in communication at Sciences Po in June 2020. She did not find a permanent position at a media agency until April 2021. This is quite different from pre-pandemic times, when many graduates of this prestigious institution received offers before graduation. Wenxi, referring to her own experience and that of her classmates, refers to it as “an unlucky generation.”

In my opinion, the keyword of the year of the pandemic is “shock.” Everyone was overwhelmed by this sudden event, and everything was immediately thrown off balance. I was working as a trainee at a large international company, a French energy company. My boss was very nice

to me and helped me as much as she could. She sent my CV to all the people that she knew in every department. But they all said they were unsure whether they would hire this year. So, as a new graduate, you must accept it when you face this. You can only adapt slowly.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

During 2020, job fairs were either canceled or turned into virtual meetings. These virtual fairs attracted few high-level professionals. Graduates lost an important channel for meeting recruiters. Wenxi continues:

I would also like to add that the career fair online at Sciences Po Paris was really bad. In fact, when the annual career fair was organized in person it would give you a lot of opportunities to get in touch with different companies, and then your school's career fair normally helps you get a job. But we had a career fair that year that was very badly organized, and it was totally online. After employers set up the meeting, they forgot about it, because people were not used to doing online meetings or digital job fairs. They did not know how to use that platform. So, in the end, as the experience was really bad, we had no way to get any career support from our school.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

Faced with this situation, Chinese graduates who want to stay in France to work adopt different strategies. For example, Qin applied for a temporary residence permit (*autorisation provisoire de séjour*, APS) to give herself a year of transition. During that year, she did another internship after graduation, while actively looking for a job:

After my one-year apprenticeship for a large luxury group, I didn't succeed at remaining at the same company to work as an employee because recruitment was frozen: from April to September, they didn't recruit any junior-level employees. I had to do another internship after graduation. It was allowed by the school because it was a special situation, and they prolonged the internship period to the end of December 2020—normally, we can't do any internships after graduation [in July]. I already had enough internship experience, as I took a gap year between my first and second year and did two internships, but I didn't have much choice, as the work market was frozen at that time. ... I went back to China to see my family at the end of 2020 and then returned to France in February to begin my job search. It took me three months to find a permanent job in June.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021



Between February and April 2021, Wenxi sent out about a hundred résumés. The job search process is always nerve-wracking. However, going through the Covid-19 ordeal collectively eased peer pressure. Because of Covid-19, respondents who found employment in France paid a heavy price. The largest consequence of the pandemic for Qin was the increase in the time it took to find a job. She feels as if she has lost a year in her professional career and has “freshman status” in the workplace. When she finally started work, she found that her colleagues were younger than she was. “I still feel as if I lost one working year; I should have begun a permanent job right after graduation.” Another consequence of the pandemic is that she is less likely to negotiate her salary with the recruiter. “I felt that I had to find a job quickly because I had reached the last round [of interviews], so I was not very forceful when I negotiated the salary; I really needed the job.”

Wenxi mentions two types of mismatches. The first is the mismatch between the graduate’s aspirations and the professional level of the job. In the context of the public health crisis, she had to accept a trade-off between the level of the job, the role itself, and the prestige of the employer.

Maybe with the same experience and the same level of professionalism, we could have obtained a better position in previous years, but with Covid-19 this year and so much turmoil in the job market, there is no way for us to find a better opportunity, and I think this is the biggest impact for us.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

The second is the mismatch between the desire for freedom of movement and geographic limits on choices. With travel restrictions, canceled flights, and the tightening of visa policies in many countries, Chinese graduates who dream of working in a country other than France and envision a career without borders find that their range of choices is narrowing. They can no longer build their career path in a series of countries, in a cumulative logic. National spaces are once again becoming places where in which graduates can envision their professional careers.

Because of Covid-19, it’s already very complicated for everyone to move. It’s already very difficult, so we basically don’t think about other countries in Europe. And then you don’t have a broader choice, such as [going to] the United States, for example, or the United Kingdom. ... In previous years, we might have looked at opportunities in Switzerland. But this year, due to the pandemic, we were forced to make a very hard decision—that is, in the end, whether to return to China or to remain in France. It feels

as if we do not have another choice. For newcomers to the workplace, I think it is very cruel. That is, you must make a very difficult and tough decision at the beginning of your career. If you choose one thing, you lose another.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

Again, the pandemic did not have the same impact on the career paths of all Chinese graduates. The crisis has also had some unexpected effects: graduates with a health-related background have experienced a broadening of their career horizon in the context of the pandemic.

#### 4.2 *After the Storm, Hit the Road*

To what extent did the pandemic alter the initial plans of our respondents? The interviews we conducted with graduates at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 enable us to assess, in hindsight, how they decided where to establish themselves in a context of uncertainty.

Despite the disruption of the pandemic, many graduates tried to carry on with their original migration plans. This is especially true for those who have a partner. For most of our respondents, maintaining their relationship remains the top priority and dictates their choice about whether to return to China after the completion of their studies. The strength of emotional bonds and marital ties seems to be particularly resistant to the upheavals in the outside world. Feng, who is in a relationship with a young Frenchman, plans to stay in France “for at least the next ten years,” even though she is worried about her professional opportunities: international exchange, the field in which she wishes to work, depends heavily on the political relationship between China and France.

I want to find a long-term job and then engage in some international exchange programs between France and China, which is one of the reasons that I am worried about the Sino-French relationship. If this relationship changes, then my employment opportunities will certainly also be affected. It's like translation: the demand for translation is definitely something that appears only when there is an exchange. If this channel of communication is hindered ...

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

The pandemic did not fundamentally change the working and living conditions in the home and host countries. The choice of our respondents to remain in France is linked to their perception of their advantages and disadvantages

in the two countries and to their priorities. In terms of professional development, our respondents emphasize: (1) better professional opportunities in France, because their French diploma and their educational institution are better recognized in France than in China; (2) a better match between their training and their professional opportunities in France; and (3) industries that are more developed in their field of specialization in France than in China. As for the quality of life and lifestyle, our respondents agree that France is ahead of China in terms of work-life balance, social protections, medical coverage, and job security. In short, it offers a better living environment for personal development.

The pandemic is temporary, but the work opportunities and quality of life conditions are permanent, according to Qin, who now works at a public relations agency in Paris:

I always wanted to remain in France after graduation, at least to work here for a few years first, and the pandemic did not change my mind. It depends on your priorities. I chose to stay because I could find a better job in France, with better value for money and reputation. I graduated from a prestigious university in France, but in China I completed my undergraduate studies at a university that is not recognized as a 211 or 985 university,<sup>1</sup> and I have heard that there is academic discrimination in China.<sup>2</sup> The second is that I have done a lot of internships and began my career in France, so to speak. Here, there is more respect for work-life balance and a lot of vacation time, which I have gotten used to. For example, I have five weeks of paid vacation and fourteen days of furlough [*réduction du temps de travail*, RTT]. The level of comfort at work here is higher, but I have heard that at home there is no distinction between

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- 1 In China's higher education system, universities that participate in the 211 and 985 programs are institutions that receive priority funding from the state. The 985 universities aim to become world-class universities in the twenty-first century. In 2022, China had 39 985 universities and 112 211 universities.
  - 2 Discrimination based on the first degree earned is a phenomenon that began to appear in China in the early 2010s, in a kind of degree inflation. Some employers (e.g., universities, state-owned enterprises) select applicants based not on their skills but on their degrees, especially their bachelor's degree. It is not uncommon for job advertisements to require applicants to complete their entire education at 211 or 985 universities. In this context, Chinese graduates who have earned a master's degree from a prestigious foreign university but their bachelor's degree from a second-tier university in China might have difficulty in being considered for some competitive positions.

life and work. I can't accept working on WeChat, I heard that in China we have to work on WeChat and have to answer requests on weekends because the boss knows that you use WeChat every day; but for me it's a personal network, and I don't want to mix it up with my work. The third is that the benefits in France are really good, such as health insurance, free medical care, unemployment benefits, etc. I have better protection here.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

If we look at the long-term trajectories of individuals, we can better understand the effects of the pandemic on international students' integration into the labor market. For many young graduates, the pandemic caused a diversion in their career paths, rather than an irreversible turning point. This is the case, for example, for graduates who returned to China at the beginning of the pandemic but returned to France to work. These zigzagging trajectories must be understood in the timeframe of the pandemic and in the contexts of the country of origin and the host country. In the context of the public health crisis and the ensuing difficulty in job hunting, these Chinese graduates reluctantly returned to China. Then, when life returned to normal, and the economic conditions improved in France, they tried to return to France, only to find that the virus was still actively circulating. The remarks of our respondents show that they are attracted by a decent salary in France as much as they are repelled by the "compressed modernity" in the Chinese context (Chang, 2010; Roulleau-Berger, 2021):<sup>3</sup> this includes a high ratio between real estate prices and salary levels in big cities, an authoritarian labor regime, fierce interpersonal competition that depresses the average salary, and what the respondents call "involution" (*nei juan*). Originally used by anthropologists to describe self-perpetuating processes that keep agrarian societies from progressing, involution has become "the kind of competition that does not allow failure or exit" (Wang & Ge, 2020).

Alexander, from Zhejiang Province, arrived in France in 2016. He studied history at the University of Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne), before obtaining a master's degree in communication at Sciences Po in June 2019. As the pandemic

3 Compressed modernity, a term coined by the South Korean sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup and used by Laurence Roulleau-Berger in a study of young Chinese migrants, means "a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space" (Chang, 2010, p. 444). The historical experience of compressed modernity in East Asia is contrasted with the temporally extended path of modernization in Western Europe (Beck & Grande, 2010, p. 425).

evolved and his understanding of China and France deepened, Alexander's life trajectory took two turns. So far, he has not found a job in consulting, which is his preference in France. Faced with the explosion of Covid-19 cases in Europe and because he is single, he returned to China in March 2020, believing that it would be easier in any case to work in a Chinese-language environment. In China, he found a job as a product manager at an information technology (IT) company in Shanghai, near his home province. But over time, he began to feel increasingly dissatisfied with the social environment in China: "I don't think there's any hope, considering the high price of housing in the country, major medical care, childcare, mortgage rates. It's not the same world as France at all." He became nostalgic about his previous life in Paris: "I still miss the Orangerie Museum and the Tuileries Garden. Shanghai also has museums and parks, but I'm in a very different mood when I wander around" (interview conducted in Chinese, January 2022).

He started looking for a job in France. In July 2021, he received a job offer in consulting and returned to Paris in October 2021. Alexander lists several reasons that influenced his desire to return to France. First, having spent several years in France to complete his studies, he is older than most of his Chinese colleagues, who consider the Chinese so-called 996 work regime from 9 am to 9 pm a day, six days a week, a blessing: "At the office, I am older than my colleagues at the same level. I'm more zen and tend more to lay flat [*tang ping*],<sup>4</sup> with no motivation to compete. Of course, more importantly, I lack the physical strength to compete." Second, he hates the social relations game in the Chinese business world, which is very complex, and prefers to escape it. "My internship experience in France was quite friendly and even warm. So, I was just particularly naive and completely ignorant of the how things worked at home, not to mention office politics." Third, his pretax monthly salary in China of RMB 20,000 (around 2,800 euros) would not be enough for him to afford an apartment in Shanghai, a prerequisite for getting married: "So, I think, in fact, in France, whether I buy a condo or not, although it is a major topic, is not a decisive and super important one as it is in China."

Alexander's story indicates that traditional factors, such as working conditions and the quality of life, still weigh heavily for Chinese graduates in their

4 Feng (2021). *Tang ping* (lit., laying flat) is a buzzword broadly used by Chinese millennials to express a "let-it-be" attitude towards anything: working hard, buying a house, getting married and having children. This word embodies the Chinese younger generation's counter-mainstream movement against the "996 work culture." See also: <https://pandaily.com/everything-you-need-to-know-about-lying-flat-%E8%BA%BA%E5%B9%B3/>.

choice of destination. It also shows the importance of studying the long-term paths of Chinese students, to understand what is driven by circumstances and what is driven by individual values, aspirations, and motivations. He concludes: "I'm just an ordinary person; I saw two societies, two contexts and social climates. I would like to go to a place where I feel comfortable."

## 5 Conclusion

The keyword in describing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of Chinese students in France is disruption. In this chapter, we analyze the disruptive effect of Covid-19 on different aspects of the lives of Chinese students studying abroad: studies, daily life, access to employment, and migratory trajectories. First, the transition to distance learning during the first phases of the pandemic had contrasting effects on the learning processes of our respondents: negative for some and beneficial for others, depending on their discipline, level of studies, and living conditions. But Covid-19 had the clearest negative effects on the subjective dimension of the student experience: an experience in French deprived of outings and sociality is far less rich. This diminution is considered more or less irreparable, depending on their future migration plans.

Second, for new graduates, the outbreak of Covid-19 at a pivotal moment in their lives created a diversion in their subsequent career paths. This diversion is relatively long lasting, depending on their training and personal situation, reflecting the effects of existing inequality in terms of the prestige of degrees and the market value of training. Chinese graduates developed strategies for adapting to their new conditions, at the cost of many concessions.

Third, looking back over time of the pandemic enables us to better understand how the students constructed their migratory paths according to the evolution in the pandemic, by evaluating the risks and prioritizing their objectives. The health considerations that seemed overwhelming at the beginning of the pandemic gradually gave way to other more traditional concerns: for example, economic security, professional success, and personal independence.

Did the Covid-19 pandemic radically change the paradigm of Chinese student mobility (Yu, 2021)? Longer-term studies might help to answer this question. Based on the results of our survey so far, we can confirm that health conditions are only one of many motivations behind Chinese students' mobility. Even during the pandemic, the construction of young migrants' paths is still involving a social rationale.

APPENDIX TABLE 7.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Discipline/grade/ institution	Year of arrival	Year of graduation	Current situation	Marital status
Tom	23	M	Skema Business School	2019	September 1, 2020	Working in China	Single
Alice	22	F	Third-year undergraduate student at ESCE Business School	2019	2020	First-year master's student at ESCE Business School	Single
Emma	21	F	First-year master's student at the Sorbonne	2020	2022	Second-year master's student at the Sorbonne	In a relationship, in China
Fei	24	F	Professional master in sociology, the Sorbonne	2015	2021	Intern	In a relationship with a Chinese student, plans to return to China after the internship
Yan	26	F	Master in sociology, Montpellier University	2019	2021	Graduation	Has a boyfriend who is a Chinese student in Germany Stuck in France because of the cancellation of flights by the airlines
Qiang	25	M	Lyon 2 University, Sociology	2014	2020	Job hunting	No info

Alexander	27	M	IEP, Paris master's in communications	2017	June 2019	He returned to China in March 2020 and worked at a tech company, then he returned to France and received an offer from a consulting company, in October 2021, then he returned to France in July 2022.	Single (had a girlfriend when he was in China then separated)
Qiaoling	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	2020	Works at a French company in Paris	In a relationship after finding a permanent contract
Sofia	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	August 2020	Works in China	Single
Fuming	31	M	IEP, Paris	2019	2020	Works at a Chinese company in France	Has a Chinese girlfriend in France
Qin	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	2020	Works at a communications company in Paris	Single
Bing	30	M	Sorbonne 4	2016	3rd year of PhD studies	PhD studies	Has a girlfriend in China

(Continued)



APPENDIX TABLE 7.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees (*cont.*)

Name	Age	Gender	Discipline/grade/ institution	Year of arrival	Year of graduation	Current situation	Marital status
Dan	29	F	Master's student in medical device engineering, Sorbonne	2016	Second-year master's student in 2020	In an internship in a medical equipment company	
Feng	25	F	Master's student in translation and communications, ISIT	2015	Second-year master's student	In training	In a relationship with a French person of Chinese origin, plans to stay in France
Kexin	32	F	PhD candidate in sociology, Paris 7 University	2010	2021	Preparing to defend PhD dissertation	Single
Jianhe	33	M	PhD candidate in sociology, Poitiers University	No info	No info	PhD candidate	Has a French girlfriend
Lily	26	F	Institute of technology Arts et Métiers	2016	2021	Long-term contract with a petroleum services and equipment company	Single
Wenxi	25	F	IEP, Paris, Master's student in communications	2014	2020	Long-term contract with a media agency	Single

Meng	24	F	3IS - Film and Cinema School Paris	2019	2021	Job hunting	Has a Chinese boyfriend in France since October 2021
Charles	25	M	Institute of Technology Arts et Metiers	2019	2021	Huawei China	Has a Chinese girlfriend, in China
Sarah	28	F	Fourth-year PhD student in sociology at Paris 5	No info	Graduated in 2022	Graduated in 2022 and then went back to China	Has a fiancé in China
Anna	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	2020	Canadian-Chinese, born in China, went back to Canada in September 2020 for a year and then returned to France in August 2021	Single, had a French boyfriend until September 2021

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# Survival during the Pandemic and Coping with Risk: an Ethnography of Vulnerable Chinese Migrants Receiving Food Assistance

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## Abstract

This chapter examines how Chinese migrants in precarious conditions living in France cope with multiple physical, mental, social, and economic risks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter is based on an ethnographic study of an ethnically based food assistance system between March and May 2021 set up by entrepreneurs of Chinese origin to help vulnerable Chinese people, mainly undocumented migrants. The chapter shows that migrants living in great precarity have to choose between the risk of potential infection and the need to find the resources for survival. This trade-off was particularly stark, as they perceive the virus as extremely dangerous but, at the same time, have few resources with which to protect themselves, avoid infection, and seek treatment. Authors highlight the multiple strategies employed by these migrants to find the resources for daily survival. In this context, the ethnic food assistance system was a key tool in helping them deal with the multiple sources of precarity driven by the pandemic. The entrepreneurs who organized the food distribution and most of the volunteers had originally come from Wenzhou (in Zhejiang) and were wealthy, whereas the beneficiaries were almost all from Northeast China. In the literature, the relationships and the interactions between these two groups in France (wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs versus vulnerable Chinese workers, or migrants from Wenzhou versus those from Northeast China) are often viewed through the lens of labor tensions and exploitation at work. However, this study sheds new light on the relationship between tension and emerging solidarity of these two groups in a crisis. The pandemic may well have had a silver lining for the Chinese communities in France by creating conditions in which these regional and class-oriented boundaries were crossed and reconfigured.

## Keywords

vulnerable Chinese migrants – undocumented migrants – coping strategies – food assistance – risk – Covid-19 pandemic – entrepreneurs – solidarity – class-oriented boundaries – regional boundaries – precarity – ethnography

### 1 Introduction

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been highly uneven across social groups. The most socioeconomically vulnerable groups were particularly exposed to the pandemic and affected by its direct and indirect consequences. Many studies on vulnerable populations have examined the compounding effects of race, gender, and immigration status (Cubrich & Tengesdal, 2021) due to the pandemic on low-wage migrant workers (Dutta, 2020) and other vulnerable groups, such as the homeless (Crouzet et al., 2022). Aung et al. (2022) show that marginalized populations tend to have little ability to respond to the risk factors involved in the Covid-19 pandemic, and the impacts on them can be serious.

In particular, studies have examined two aspects of Covid-19 pandemic risk: exposure to pandemic-related risk and the perception of pandemic-related risk. They are highly intertwined: examination of the exposure to pandemic-related risk targets objective risks that affect the health and well-being of individuals, whereas examination of risk perception looks at how these risks are subjectively or collectively perceived. Numerous studies on exposure to risk during the Covid-19 pandemic indicate that, since January 2020, migrant populations have been particularly exposed to the physical, psychological, and economic consequences of the pandemic and the measures that have been taken to contain the spread of the virus. Although the Covid-19 crisis has exposed longstanding structural problems, the structural conditions that make marginalized migrants more vulnerable have not changed (Sanfelici, 2021).

Studies have pointed out that migrants—in particular, migrants with precarious housing—have been particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and are more susceptible to illness and death than other groups (McNamara et al., 2021; Ralli et al., 2020a, 2020b). This is because these populations often find it difficult to adhere to public health directives, have a higher prevalence of underlying physical and mental comorbidities than the general population, and have limited access to essential health care, so their infection with Covid-19 is often untreated and often develops into more severe disease (Greenaway et al., 2020; Ralli et al., 2020a, 2020b).

Through a systemic review of multiple databases on peer-reviewed and “gray literature” (literature produced by organizations outside the traditional commercial or academic publishing channels) on migrants and Covid-19 in eighty-two high-income countries, Hayward et al. (2021) find that migrants are at high risk of infection with Covid-19 and are overrepresented in confirmed infections as well as reported deaths. The data from this review suggest that undocumented migrants, migrant health-care and care workers, and migrants housed in detention centers are particularly exposed to infection with Covid-19. Using a large collection of data that covers 17,288,532 adults in England, Mathur et al. (2021) show that some ethnic minority populations in the country have higher risk of testing positive for Covid-19 infection and of adverse outcomes than the White population. In particular, South Asians, Blacks, those of mixed ethnicity, and those of “other ethnicities” have a much higher risk of testing positive for Covid-19 than Whites, with an increased risk of Covid-19-related hospitalization and death (Mathur et al., 2021).

In general, migrants are more exposed to risk factors that make them vulnerable to Covid-19, such as unstable employment, overcrowded housing, legal and administrative barriers to health-care services, and low levels of competence in the local language. These factors have a negative impact on awareness of the severity of the disease and on the ability to take actions to reduce their exposure. Also, as Burton-Jeangros et al. (2020) point out, faced with a higher prevalence of exposure to Covid-19 and poorer mental health conditions, migrants are less likely to seek health-care assistance.

In France, the national survey “Epidemiology and Living Conditions” (EpiCov; *Épidémiologie et conditions de vie*) studies the spread of the virus across the population and the consequences of the pandemic on the daily lives and health of individuals. The first results of the survey show, among other things, that the positivity rate is twice as high (9.4%) among immigrants born outside Europe as among non-immigrants (4.1%) (Warszawski et al., 2020). This can be explained in part by their living conditions, which are often of lower quality than that of the rest of the French population and often expose them to more risk factors of infection, such as precarious sanitary conditions and strong residential promiscuity.

The pandemic and the measures taken to contain it have also affected psychological health. Immigrant populations seem to suffer a greater deterioration in psychological health (Bukuluki et al., 2020) than non-immigrant populations, which is often linked to increased exposure to socioeconomic and physical risks (Bukuluki et al., 2020) among immigrants. Using data from the national EpiCov survey, Gosselin et al. (2021) show that immigrants in France are particularly exposed to job strain injuries, which could contribute significantly to the decline in their mental well-being. Some research



(Ming & De Jong, 2021; Pan et al., 2021; Reny & Barreto, 2020; Wu et al., 2021) also shows that the mental well-being of immigrants, especially those of Asian origin, can be negatively affected by experiences with xenophobia, racism, and discrimination as part of the racialization of Covid-19 (Reny & Barreto, 2020). In Chapter 3, we examine how the experience with anti-Asian racism, among other factors, affects the feelings of stress and anxiety among people of Chinese origin in France.

In addition to the physical and psychological impacts, the public health crisis has also contributed to a widening of social inequality in terms of professional and financial vulnerability. In general, the most marginalized populations, such as immigrant populations, have been especially affected by the decline in employment, the closure of “non-essential” business, and the strict restrictions on travel and movement. Studies on several European, African (Falkenhain et al., 2021), Asian (Lei et al., 2020; Suhardiman et al., 2021; Suresh et al., 2020), and American (Navarrete & Sanchez, 2020) countries show that immigrant populations have been particularly affected by the loss or the reduction of jobs caused by the pandemic.

Analyzing nationwide data from the Understanding Society Covid-19 survey, Hu (2020) examines the impact of Covid-19 on people’s economic well-being in the UK and shows that Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority migrants in the UK were more likely than UK-born White British people to experience job and income loss, as well as face increased financial hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic. Worldwide, the pandemic exacerbated entrenched socio-economic inequality along intersecting ethnic and native–migrant lines.

Other studies have looked at the perception of risk related to the Covid-19 pandemic by different populations. The results vary widely across countries, social groups, generations, and individuals (Cori et al., 2020; Dryhurst et al., 2020). However, across countries and groups, the risk perception of Covid-19 is strongly correlated with factors including personal experience with the virus, individualistic and prosocial values, hearing about the virus from friends and family, trust in government, science, and medical professionals, personal knowledge of government strategy, personal and collective efficacy (Dryhurst et al., 2020), and the strength of the social welfare state and the speed of government intervention. More broadly, research shows that, across countries, risk perceptions of Covid-19 are consistently correlated with experiential and sociocultural factors (Dryhurst et al., 2020). Few studies examine risk perception related to the Covid-19 pandemic among migrant populations. By studying the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on risk perceptions by different ethnic groups in Germany and focusing on both ethnic disparities and their underlying mechanisms, Soiné et al. (2021) extend previous studies on risk perception

during the pandemic. The results by Soiné et al. (2021) show the differences in risk perception between migrant populations in Germany and highlight that risk perception is correlated with individual experiences and sociocultural factors: respondents with a background in Turkey or the former Yugoslavia have a higher increase in the perception of health and financial risk than Germans, whereas respondents of Asian origin were affected by the pandemic more than German respondents with regard to health but not regarding the perception of financial risk.

Our study examines how Chinese migrants in France whose living conditions are precarious cope with the exposure to and perception of risk linked to the multiple physical, psychological, social, and economic threats triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. To do so, we carried out an ethnographic study of a food assistance program set up between March and May 2021 by entrepreneurs of Chinese origin, to help people of Chinese origin who were in need. We conducted ethnographic interviews with the Chinese migrants who benefited from the food assistance program as well as its organizers. For these migrants, the program was a major tool used in coping with the multiple threats exacerbated by the pandemic: we examine the role of this tool in strategies for coping with the risks from the pandemic and perceptions of these risks. Some studies have examined the role, structure, and evolution of institutional solidarity and food assistance in France since 1930 (Brodiez, 2006; Duchesne, 2003; Retière & Le Crom, 2000, 2018). As seen in this study, the food distribution system run by Chinese entrepreneurs enabled us to locate Chinese migrants in precarious economic conditions—a group that is difficult to access and that, therefore, has been little studied. In this way, the food assistance program enabled us to see how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected their daily lives and how they cope with health and financial risks from the pandemic.

### 1.1 *Studying Pandemic Risks and Coping Strategies by Chinese Migrants in France: an Approach Combining the Sociology of Risk and Economic Anthropology*

Based on our literature review, we use two major themes to characterize the experience with risk by migrants in unstable economic conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, migrants, notably those living in unstable conditions, have greater exposure to the physical, psychological, and economic risks of the pandemic than people in more stable conditions; second, risk perception related to the pandemic strongly depends on personal experience with the virus and sociocultural factors. We then consider that Chinese migrants who live in Paris in unstable conditions are especially exposed to multiple risks from the pandemic and their risk perception depends on their particular

experience and on the collective representation of them in society. We examine the perceptions of these migrants of different forms of risk and how they prioritize them and cope with them.

To do so, we employ two disciplinary frameworks. First, in studying the differential perception of risk, we use the “psychometric paradigm” developed by Slovic (Slovic, 2000), which is a landmark study in research about public attitudes toward risk. Then, in examining the practical strategies used to cope with the risks from the pandemic, we use the framework of “poor people’s money” (*l’argent des pauvres*) developed by Laé and Murard (1985) in economic sociology to study how people in precarious conditions manage their money and extend it here to migration studies.

Slovic describes the psychometric paradigm as a theoretical framework that assumes risk is subjectively defined by individuals who may be influenced by a wide array of psychological, social, institutional, and cultural factors. One of the most important assumptions in this approach is that risk is inherently subjective and does not exist independent of individuals’ thinking, culture, and socialization. The psychometric paradigm relies mainly on references at the level of social representation and is based on judgments that are shared more or less widely by members of a group or subgroup (e.g., a professional group) and emphasizes the importance of the sources of information and their impact on these judgments (Cadet & Kouabéna, 2005). We apply the psychometric paradigm in our study of risk perception among Chinese migrants in France to explore two main issues: (1) the perceptions and priorities of different risks from the pandemic among Chinese migrants and (2) the collective social representation of Covid-19, influenced by institutional actors, such as political authorities and the media as well as collective experience, on which these perceptions are based.

Secondly, by integrating the “poor people’s money” framework into our study, we view how Chinese migrants living in France cope with the risks from the Covid-19 pandemic. This framework enables us to go down to the level of individual agency and to examine microstrategies, anchored in the socioeconomic and material context, that were employed to respond to the different problems that emerged in various aspects of daily life: health, food, social and professional life. It focuses on the economic micropractices used by people living in poverty and precarity, which are either barely legal or wholly illegal, that enable them to respond to those numerous and varying problems. Our use of the “poor people’s money” framework enables us to examine the different trade-offs and priorities in the daily needs of migrants and illustrates the perception of different risks due to the pandemic and the strategies employed to cope with them.

Although the sociology of migration covers the economic practices by migrants (Portes, 2020; Portes & Haller, 2005), it has included the “poor people’s money” framework in a very limited way: for example, Peraldi (2007a, 2007b, 2016), Tarrus (2000, 2002, 2015a, 2015b), and Tarrus et al. (2013) examine economic strategies of dubious legality, as well as those that are illegal, which enable migrants to survive and circulate transnationally.

In the next section, we first describe the food assistance program: the circumstances that led to its creation, the main actors involved, and its practical organization. We then describe the profiles of the migrants who benefit from this system as well as their particular backgrounds and the reasons that they access this food assistance program in particular. Finally, we examine the role of this system in economic micropractices to respond to the constraints on daily life — in particular, the risks due to the pandemic: health risks and the loss of work and income, among others.

## 2 The Food Assistance Program Monographed during Covid-19

### 2.1 *The Creation of Aixin Lianmeng*

Since the implementation of the law on the modernization of agriculture and fisheries in July 27, 2010, food aid has been regulated in the French legal framework (*Direction Générale de la Cohésion Sociale*, 2016). France has a long tradition of collective solidarity to provide economic and financial assistance for people in need. One form of assistance is food assistance, performed by volunteers and by legal entities under public laws, such as the Communal Center for Social Action (*Centre Communal de l’Action Sociale*, or CCAS; *Direction Générale de la Cohésion Sociale*, 2016). The organizations and actors involved in food assistance are eligible for public funding. In 2015, in the Île-de-France region, the Regional Interdepartmental Directorate of Food, Agriculture and Forestry (*Direction Régionale Interdépartementale de l’alimentation, de l’agriculture et de la forêt*, or DRIAFF) counted 420 such entities offering food assistance. They are extremely diverse and include local branches of the longstanding national food assistance networks (e.g., *Les restaurants du Coeur*), local organizations specializing in food assistance (*La Chorba*, *Aide alimentaire aux Deuillois*, *Vivre Mieux à Torcy*, *Paris Tout Petits*, etc.), (3) more general organizations involved in combating social exclusion (*La Croix Rouge* at the national level and other organizations at the local level in Cergy, Gonesse, and Bondy, such as *le Mail- lon*, *Maison de la Solidarité*, or *la Marmite*), and (4) organizations that specialize in a field other than food assistance but include it as part of their activities, such as *Aurore*, *Rose des Vents*, and *Oppelia Le Triangle*.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, these organizations played a major role in providing financial and psychological assistance to thousands of people in the Île-de-France region in unstable economic conditions or whose living conditions deteriorated because of the socioeconomic and public health crisis. In this context, in addition to the activities of humanitarian and charitable organizations and official and institutional actors, other activities were collectively organized and performed by ordinary citizens who wanted to help people in need. These activities targeted different social, ethnic, and professional groups, and in January 2021 a system of food assistance was organized by people of Chinese origin for other people of Chinese origin in precarity. In March 2021, one particular food distribution system of this type, *Aixin lianmeng* (in English, Love Alliance; in French, *Coeur solidaire*), was created by a Chinese-born Frenchman named Dominique. The Love Alliance food assistance program targeted vulnerable Chinese people living in the Île-de-France region, particularly those who did not have a legal residence card in France, whose work was unstable, and whose living conditions could be described as precarious.

Dominique, a fifty-year-old primary school teacher originally from Wenzhou, went to France in 2002. At first, he worked in the catering industry, doing site management. After nine years, he obtained French citizenship, enabling him since 2013 to manage a tobacco store in Aubervilliers, a northern suburb of Paris. In 2016 he became the president of the French-Asian Federation in Seine-Saint-Denis (*Fédération franco-asiatique à Seine-Saint Denis*), and in December 2021 he was elected city councilor of Aubervilliers. Through the federation, he and other members became involved in social activities for people of Chinese origin in France, such as helping them with bureaucratic procedures (in particular, accessing the health-care system and lodging complaints about all kinds of attacks) or organizing fundraising for the repatriation to China of a person who had died. In February 2020, during the first stage of the public health crisis, he was also involved in donating surgical masks to hospitals in Wuhan in collaboration with the alumni association of Wuhan University. Out of concern about the profound impacts of the public health and socioeconomic crisis on the daily lives of thousands of Chinese migrants, Dominique set up a system to provide food to Chinese people in need, after learning that the Chinese embassy was handing out “Spring Festival” packs that included, among other things, snacks, masks, and medicine. Dominique heard from a friend that, due to the economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, a Chinese tenant could afford to eat only one meal a day and was starving. People like this tenant had therefore asked whether the embassy had any packs

left over. This made Dominique aware that many Chinese people were living in extreme poverty and, for linguistic or cultural reasons, could not access the many forms of help provided by French institutions and French organizations:

I had already been thinking about it [the food assistance program], but didn't act on it, considering that my compatriots without residence cards would definitely be affected by the pandemic and that many people might have problems with food and accommodations. A couple, who had asked whether any Spring Festival packs were left, told me that a brother's tenants only ate one meal a day. And that really touched me. I just had the idea to help those who need it, but I didn't know before that there were people truly in difficulty. This was the catalyst and strengthened my confidence about doing it.

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He immediately contacted members of the federation, as well as forwarding and sharing information on WeChat with his contacts. Doing so enabled him to assemble many people and organizations that wanted to help in the creation of a food assistance program, including a few Chinese companies in France, such as the Wenzhou travel agency. At first, in March 2021, the organizational team consisted of a dozen people. Dominique was in charge of the fundraising and of managing the official WeChat account for *Aixin Lianmeng*. A second person, who had the title of secretary-general, was responsible for announcing the food distributions as well as the payments to the supermarkets providing the food, through the bank account of the federation. Another person was in charge of recruiting volunteers and circulating the recruitment information on WeChat. The food distribution took place at two supermarkets, both managed by people of Chinese origin: *New Oriental (Nouvel Orient)* in Aubervilliers and *G20* in the nineteenth arrondissement in Paris. The managers of the two supermarkets are in charge of contacting the suppliers and providing space for the distribution. They both had personal ties with Dominique: the *G20* manager had been a student of Dominique's in China, and the *New Oriental* manager also came from Wenzhou.

## 2.2 *How the Food Assistance Program Aixin Lianmeng Works*

After the team and the plan were confirmed, Dominique began to ask for donations. He estimated that the average amount needed for each distribution was 2,000 euros. The donations could be made either in cash or by donating food directly. As the founder, he set an example and was the first to post in the

WeChat group that he was donating 110 bags of rice, at a value of 780 euros. Other contributors followed Dominique's example and also donated a total amount of 110 bags of rice. The donors had very different profiles. Many of them were friends of Dominique or members of the federation and of the Church of Notre Dame of China, a Church located in Paris for people from China. Some donors were older overseas Chinese people, such as Mr. Ding, who donated 2,000 euros to the Love Alliance. The Church members donated a total of 4,500 euros. Other donors did not have legal residence in France and were living in relatively precarious conditions: according to Dominique, a woman from Taiwan donated 350 euros despite her own precarious financial conditions living in France. In addition, donations came directly from individuals in China, often relatives of the donors in France. For example, one donor's sister in China donated nearly RMB 1,000 (150 euros). Some Chinese companies in France donated to the food assistance program, including RMB 30,000 (4,100 euros) from the Wenzhou travel agency. The owner of the Yun Tian Lou restaurant donated twenty bags of rice, and the owner of the Chinese Deli in Belleville donated 2,000 euros. Some organizations, such as the Women's Association, collected donations from individuals. Lastly, many churches, including the Wenzhou Church Association in France, donated 4,000 euros for two food distributions.

In order to receive a food parcel from the Love Alliance program, beneficiaries had to complete a form with personal information (Figure 8.1), which was available through the program's WeChat account. Dominique was in charge of checking the eligibility of beneficiaries based on information about their financial conditions, prioritizing them based on need. The organizers also prioritized migrants who lacked residence cards or jobs and had recently arrived in France.

Name	
Place of Origin (province)	
Age	
Gender	
Date of Arrival in France	
Passport Number (not required)	
Contact number	
Address in France (city name)	
Residence Card Status (yes or no)	

FIGURE 8.1 Application form to be filled by beneficiaries in order to receive a food parcel from the "Love Alliance" food assistance program

Around 150 people registered for each distribution. After their eligibility was verified, approximately 100 people were approved for food parcels. The first distribution took place on April 15, when 112 parcels were distributed. A total of ten distributions were held, once a week, with approximately 100 parcels distributed each time. The highest number of distributions was 138 (on April 30, at the fifth distribution), and the lowest was 80 (on May 28, at the ninth distribution). The content of the parcels was more or less same every time, depending on the level of donations. Generally, it included:

- a 5 kg bag of rice
- a 1 kg bag of flour
- a bottle of oil
- 30 eggs
- 2 bottles of milk
- 2 cabbages

As shown by the following photo, the food distribution is held in front of a supermarket run by Chinese entrepreneurs, and there is a waiting line.

Sometimes, they also comprised packages of bean curd (tofu) donated by Tofu House (La Maison du Tofu) in Paris, orange juice donated by relatives of the owner of G20, or a package of ten masks donated by other volunteers.



FIGURE 8.2 A food distribution scene organized by the "Love Alliance" program  
PHOTO: HUAREN JIE



People who registered for a distribution had to go in person to collect their parcel, unless they were infected or ill with Covid-19 or were physically unable to go, and they had to present proof of their identity. Five to eight volunteers were present at each distribution. One person was tasked with verifying the identity of those collecting parcels, and the other volunteers helped with distributing them. The volunteers were recruited by Mrs. Liu, a team member who posted ads on the Huaren Jie (Chinese Street) website. They came from various backgrounds, and the team changed every week; some volunteers assisted with ten distributions, others with only one, and a few of them were also beneficiaries of the food assistance program. One volunteer owned three restaurants in the Paris area, and another worked as a vendor at Le Bon Marché, a department store and wanted a part-time job during the lockdown while it was closed. Some volunteers did not have legal residence either but helped with the distributions as a show of solidarity.

The food assistance program was conceived as a form of ethnic solidarity, implicitly targeting people of Chinese origin who were perceived as especially vulnerable. Many Chinese people in precarious conditions in France do not speak French fluently: these linguistic barriers prevent them from benefiting from other forms of aid, including from the government and nongovernmental organizations.

Nevertheless, according to the organizers, the food assistance program was not officially available exclusively to Chinese people and could have benefited others as well. However, all the advertising and information about the food distribution were published on Chinese websites (e.g., Huaren Jie) or on WeChat in Chinese. In describing the scope of its activities, Dominique recounted the



FIGURE 8.3 Volunteers of the “Love Alliance” program during a food distribution session  
PHOTO: HUAREN JIE

following episode, which is indicative of the orientation of the food assistance program:

A Black man was waiting there, and so I asked him if he would eat rice. He said he would eat anything. ... That day we also had parcels left over, so I gave one to him. But the main targets are fellow Chinese people and the Chinese community in France.

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### 3 The Beneficiaries of the Food Assistance Program

Our research team attended three food distributions, during two of which a team member also participated as a volunteer. We conducted fifteen interviews with the organizers, the volunteers, and the beneficiaries. This work enables us to highlight the social and migratory profiles of the beneficiaries of the program, as well as their living conditions in France. The beneficiaries lived in precarious conditions, and the vast majority also lacked a legal residence permit.

According to the organizers, for each food distribution, of the 80 people who registered, on average, less than ten have a legal residence permit. This is unsurprising, given that the program targeted people living in precariousness, who usually lack legal residence. The beneficiaries were all newcomers, having been in France for less than three years, and worked illegally in construction or in catering and at restaurants. Many of them had lost their jobs and all their sources of income because of the public health crisis due to the pandemic. Many beneficiaries were over sixty years old, had great difficulty in finding a job, and survived only because of the social benefits, such as the universal health-care coverage or the Active Solidarity Income (*revenu de solidarité active*, RSA) offered by the French state, and the support of friends and relatives. In terms of geographic origin, most of the beneficiaries were from Northeast China (Liaoning and Jilin Provinces), and others were from Hebei and Fujian as well as from big cities, such as Tianjin and Shanghai. Among the twelve interviewees, six were from Shenyang in the Northeast, one woman was from Jilin, two were from Hebei, and one person each was from Fujian, Shanghai, and Tianjin, respectively. Most of them were over forty-five years old: six in their fifties, three who were over sixty, two in their thirties, and one woman in her early forties. They also had low levels of education. Although most of them had completed middle school or high school, Mr. Qi, from Fujian, had never attended school, and one woman from Fujian was illiterate. All of them went to France looking for better economic opportunities and economic

freedom for themselves and for their families. A professional downgrading in China sometimes drove them leave their home country and migrate to France. Mr. Yin, fifty-one years old, was a taxi driver in Shenyang and decided to go to France with his family after being laid off in 2011:

I was a taxi driver in China, but my children's school cost money, and the loans were too much for me: I made RMB 3,000 a month, but every month I owed RMB 1,100 to repay the loan. A friend said: "Come to France—you can become rich." So, in 2011, I went to France, on my own. Three years later, my wife joined me, and then my daughter arrived in 2019. Now, I have paid off all the loans.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2021

Mrs. He, who was forty-three years old, came from Yanbian, Jilin, and worked at a paper mill factory in China. After being laid off, she became a cleaner. She struggled to pay for her children's schooling. In 2010, when her child started the fifth grade, she decided to go to France alone, while her child and her husband remained in Yanbian.

As illustrated by other ethnographic studies carried out in France among undocumented Chinese migrants (Lévy & Lieber, 2008; Wang, 2016), after arriving in France, many of them discovered the "collective lie" (Wang, 2021) socially constructed within their networks, which presents immigration to France as an easy way to earn money and to give their family members staying in China a better life. Therefore, they experienced disillusion due to illegal migration and mental suffering after leaving China (Wang, 2021). Moreover, in many cases, arrival in France is the last step in a transnational path through multiple European and non-European countries. Before arriving in France, some respondents in our study lived in other countries, such as Italy or Spain, or traveled through countries such as Russia, Turkey, Hungary, and Germany. This was the case for Mrs. Zhou, who is a fifty-nine-year-old originally from Shanghai; she arrived in France in 2000 after living in Italy and acquired a residence card in 2013. After graduating from high school in China, she was assigned to work in a textile factory in Shanghai but was laid off in 1995 because of an economic crisis. She then spent four years working as a salesperson in a shopping mall and for an insurance company. A neighbor told her that she would be able to earn a lot of money in France, so she decided to move there. But since her arrival, she has not been able to find a job and, instead, makes a living by picking up rags on the street and selling them on the second-hand market.

I actually made money at the insurance company when I was in China. My upstairs neighbor said that we can earn more in France; I was cheated. In France, I realized that looking for work is difficult. When I couldn't find work, I picked up rags and sold goods. I had hepatitis B, so I couldn't be a nanny. I'm too old to work in restaurants and hotels. Today, I still pick up rags, thanks to the town hall, which provided me with a small stand at Porte de Clignancourt.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2021

For others, France was the main destination. Most of them arrived on a tourist visa or business visa. Mr. Qi, however, had first traveled illegally to Turkey and was arrested by the Turkish police and repatriated to China; trying again, he obtained a tourist visa to enter France. Some respondents arrived in France with a tourist visa, after commissioning a travel agency to organize the trip, and decided to stay in France after the visa expired. Others arrived in France through different smuggling networks, which provide false documents and different connections across countries. In all cases, respondents invested several thousand euros in making the trip—by their account, around 9,000–15,000 euros. This fee covered, among other things, travel documents, bureaucratic procedures, and the purchase of false documents. Many of them borrowed the money to pay the smuggling networks that organized their trip. After arriving in France, they could not obtain legal status and find a legal job. They are strongly connected to and dependent on their ethnic community, which provides them with the resources to find housing (in general, they live with family members or with other Chinese people under precarious condition) as well as a job and helps them manage everyday problems in a foreign country.

In conclusion, the beneficiaries of the food assistance were migrants living in France under irregular and precarious conditions. They were women and men with low education and from Chinese urban areas, who decided in their late thirties or forties to travel to Europe including France, after having had work experience in different sectors and very often after professional or familial changes in China. They decided to migrate to France in order to find new opportunities, seeking economic and social freedom. They invested thousands of euros in traveling to France and lived there under irregular conditions. To support themselves in France, pay back their loans, and, in some cases, give relatives in China some financial help, they worked as undocumented workers in construction and in catering and restaurants, as well as in the care sector and in general in the Chinese ethnic economy. They also engaged in small-scale trading without a license, in local urban markets or in the street. Because of

their undocumented status, they had little access to the welfare state, including medical care. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has strongly affected the sectors in which they work and their economic activities and, in many cases, left them without any source of income.

#### 4 Strong Vulnerability to Financial and Health Risks

The Covid-19 pandemic has strongly affected and destabilized the daily lives of these people, plunging them into extremely precarious conditions. The measures taken by the French authorities in order to limit the spread of the virus had a significant impact on many economic activities, in particular on catering and restaurants as well as the care sector. On March 12, 2020, President Emmanuel Macron announced that as March 17, all “non-essential” services, including schools, universities, restaurants, coffees, bars, and gyms would close. Workers in these sectors had to reduce their activities and, in many cases, had their hours reduced or were temporarily unemployed. Workers who lost their jobs received unemployment benefits or unemployment assistance from the French welfare state. However, undocumented workers were excluded from these types of aid. Chinese people working as undocumented workers in Asian restaurants, in the hotel industry, in the care system, or in other jobs, lost not only their jobs but also any type of income. This was the case for Mr. Yin, a fifty-one-year-old who arrived in France in 2011 and worked undocumented in an Asian restaurant in a suburb of Paris. Before the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown, he earned about 1,600 euros a month. During the national lockdown, he lost his job and his income. In order to pay his bills, he relied on his family for money in addition to borrowing money from friends:

Before the lockdown, my salary was enough for our family. My wife hasn't worked for fifteen years. Before the national lockdown, I earned 1,500–1,600 euros per month, and it was enough; the rent was 700 euros a month. However, during the pandemic, I didn't have any salary as the restaurant was closed because of the government's orders. I owed the landlord rent for six months. My family depends on money sent from China. I also borrowed 3,000 euros from friends.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2021

Mr. Wu, a thirty-eight-year-old who worked at a restaurant near Saint-Lazare in the eighth arrondissement in Paris experienced the same situation. Mr. Wu arrived in France in 2017 through a travel agency, and his wife and two

children joined him in Paris in 2019. When he arrived in France, he worked as an undocumented construction worker, doing cement and brickwork, and then as stock worker for two years. During that period, he earned 1,000–1,200 euros per month. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, he worked as a dishwasher, earning 1,400–1,500 euros per month and had to spend 1,250 euros on rent for the apartment where he lives with his family in a suburb of Paris.

During the lockdown period, I didn't have a salary. I stayed home for a long time and depended on the money sent by my relatives in China. The restaurant where I worked was closed, and, as I'm undocumented, I could not receive any government assistance. My colleagues who have legal status in France received 1,100 euros or 1,200 euros in subsidies per month. They didn't need to go to work but still earned 1,200 euros per month, whereas when you work, you earn 1,500 euros. I was unemployed for eight months, from March 2020 to June 2020, and then from October 2021 to June 2021 [in 2121]. My parents told me to return to China, but I couldn't because my children are studying here, and, besides, I owe money.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

Since 2008, when he arrived in France, Mr. Qi, a fifty-three-year-old from Fujian, has found unreliable temporary work: he is hired to unload trucks, move goods, and cut wires in clothing factories, among other things. He lives in his own room in an apartment with seven to eight people at a cost of 200 euros per month.

At the beginning, they don't trust you because you have just arrived, so I did many unloading jobs. Afterward, they [the bosses] get to know you and call you if they have a request, but it's only for moving and unloading goods. I have never worked in restaurants, as they only want young people. During the lockdown, I was unemployed and looked for food in trash bins and accepted help from a food assistance program. I also borrowed money from friends. Since June 2021, it has been getting better. I'm now working in the building industry doing renovation, to which I was introduced by a friend. I earn 1,000 euros per month. But from March 2020 until June 2021, I didn't have a salary, only sporadic income.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, AUGUST 2021

Mrs. Zhou is a fifty-nine-year-old from Shanghai who went to Italy in 2000. She then moved to France, where she got a residence permit in March 2013.

When she first arrived in France, she worked as a nanny for a Chinese family, but because she had hepatitis B, she was fired and never worked as a nanny again. She then started to collect junk and sell it in the second-hand market. Since 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, she had earned a living by selling second-hand goods found in the garbage, from a stand offered to her by the city hall of the eighteenth arrondissement. She told her story and described the impact of the national lockdown on her life in this way:

My story could be a book. I was arrested by the police several times for selling things on the street without the right to do so and for being undocumented. I had six or seven lawsuits, each of which cost 1,200 euros for hiring a lawyer. In 2019, I applied to the municipality for a legal one-meter stall, which is located at the end of the [Metro] line 4, Porte de Clignancourt, and only had to pay 5 euros a year to use it. I had worked at a restaurant and hotel before, but the hotel didn't want me because I'm too old. I could not collect goods to sell after the pandemic, and I ate by scavenging vegetables from the garbage cans at the back of the Paris Store; supermarkets threw away unsold vegetables. By mid-May 2020, I could sell second-hand goods again, but in November I stopped, and in February 2021, I started selling again, and then I shut down again, over and over again. At that time, my first priority was paying the rent, saving money on food, as I can find food by picking up the garbage. I also borrowed some money from friends and applied to the French government for rent reduction of more than 100 euros, as the rent on my studio was about 600 euros.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2021

Another interviewee, Mr. Liu, experienced significant hardships due to the Covid-19 crisis. A sixty-one-year-old from Shenyang, he arrived in Germany with his wife, on a tourist visa, in 2002. He then moved to France, where he obtained a residence card in 2015. In France, he worked at a Chinese-owned Japanese restaurant. Because of poor working conditions at the restaurant, he quit his job there in November 2019; however, due to the pandemic, the national lockdown, and the economic crisis in the restaurant and catering sector, he could not find another job, and he was not entitled to unemployment benefits because he had left the job voluntarily. This is how he recounted his experience:

I got my residence card in 2015; I worked as a waiter at a Chinese-owned Japanese restaurant for six months, until November 12, 2019, earning

2,500 euros a month. I quit this job because there was too much work. Usually, I worked from 9:30 am to 9:30 pm, and on Fridays and Saturdays we finished after 10:00 pm. My health was not good, and I was very tired. ... So, I decided to quit, and I did not receive any unemployment benefits. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic began with a lockdown. Because of that, I had to stay at home for a year and a half without any income. I had some savings, a few thousand euros, and my children supported me financially, too. In June 2021, I received a disability card, and in July I began to receive an allowance of 800 euros a month as a disabled person. I have not worked since the last job, and I live on the allowance. My disability has a big impact on my life; I can't walk steadily, and I can't carry things with my hands.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, AUGUST 2021

The Chinese people quoted here were engaged in precarious and uncertain economic activities without any form of legal protection. In many cases, they were undocumented workers, and their work relations were based only on a bond of trust and on verbal agreements with their employers (Peraldi, 2007a, 2016). The Covid-19 pandemic turned their professional conditions upside down, by forcing them to leave their jobs and suddenly eliminating their main source of revenue. In many cases, these people were ineligible for any institutional aid from the French welfare system. This was particularly serious because, due to their modest income, they had little savings and, in some cases, were supporting a family. Under these conditions, they used elaborate strategies to earn the money needed to pay rent, buy food, and meet basic needs.

These Chinese migrants in precarious conditions are also particularly vulnerable to the health risks presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to their unstable financial conditions, many undocumented Chinese migrants cannot afford to rent a flat or a single room. On the contrary, many of them live in overcrowded housing and share a small room with four to eight other Chinese migrants. In the Paris region, renting a bed in a shared room costs 90 euros per month: in that context, in particular during the most acute phases of the Covid-19 pandemic (March–May 2020 and October–December 2020), it was impossible to take protective measures, such as isolation in the case of infection or social distancing, and put in place other measures to reduce the risk of infection. Some respondents were infected with the Covid-19 virus and spread the disease to their own roommates. For example, Mrs. He, who worked as undocumented nanny as well as a part-time cleaner, fell ill with Covid-19 in February 2021 and transmitted it to the three Chinese people with whom she shared a 120 euros per month room, located in a Paris suburb.



The only symptom I had was a fever. I did the test, and it was positive. I tried to limit my outings, and I could no longer work as a nanny. I told my roommates that I was infected; they were very careful, but we were all infected at the same time—everyone in the room was infected.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2021

Mrs. He and her roommates were aware that the risk of infection with the Covid-19 virus was high because they lived in a small room. However, none of them had the economic resources to move to a private room, and even less so after the loss of income they experienced during the national lockdown and the measures taken by the authorities to counteract circulation of the virus. For example, Mrs. He, even before being infected, lost a majority of her income because her nanny services were no longer needed; the parents for whom she worked could look after their children themselves during the lockdown, when working from home was mandatory. Like her roommates, she could not move elsewhere. Like Mrs. He, Mr. Wu, a thirty-eight-year-old undocumented man working at a Chinese restaurant, was infected with Covid-19 in March 2021 and, because he lacked the financial means, had no choice but to remain in the small room where he lived with his wife and children. He tried to protect his family by sleeping alone in the upper bunk and by wearing a mask during the entire day:

I was infected in March 2021, and my wife and children were not. In order to try to protect them, I slept in the upper bunk, while my wife and my children slept in the lower bunk. I also had some Chinese medicine, such as *lianhua qingwen*, and drank ginger tea. I wore a mask during the entire day and even at night, when I was sleeping.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

In addition to their general risk of infection, these migrants are at high risk of developing severe forms of the disease because of their limited access to the French health-care system. This is mostly the case because they have limited proficiency in the French language, which makes it difficult for them to express themselves and they are relatively isolated. This problem of access preceded the Covid-19 pandemic but was greatly exacerbated by it. For that reason, many Chinese migrants in precarious conditions have health issues that have not been properly treated and could be aggravated by or worsen the effects of Covid-19. For example, during the spread of the pandemic in France, Mrs. He was very worried because she has an autoimmune disease that can worsen the effects of infection with Covid-19:

I have a disease called lupus erythematosus, and in 2012 ... I was in intensive care for a month. This is a disease of the immune system that affects internal organs, as well as the eyes and bones. Because of this disease, I can't work in restaurants; I don't have enough physical strength. So, I can only look after children and clean. ... I have a disease that affects the immune system, which can be exacerbated by Covid-19.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

In some cases, Chinese migrants are not familiar with the French health-care system and are skeptical about being treated in it; this is particularly true with regard to Covid-19. As shown in the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2, many Chinese migrants compared the management of the pandemic in China and in France and concluded that French medical and political authorities were less aware of the dangers of the disease than Chinese medical and political authorities and were not prepared to treat patients with it. In many cases, Chinese migrants preferred to contact Chinese doctors in either China or France who practice Western medicine or practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine. This was the case with Mrs. Zhao, a sixty-one-year-old woman from Shenyang who arrived in France in 2019. Mrs. Zhao did not trust the French medical system and, after she was infected with coronavirus, she did not believe that she could be treated at a French hospital:

After I tested positive for infection at the pharmacy, the pharmacy staff told me to leave, and I couldn't understand what they were saying; it felt as if they were trying to get rid of me. I was so sick that I thought I was going to die. I finally went to a Chinese doctor, who gave me an herbal infusion for more than ten days, which helped, but I am still feeling the after-effects. After walking a few steps, I have trouble breathing.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

Mrs. Zhao's experience summarizes that of many other Chinese migrants in France during the Covid-19 pandemic: their lack of proficiency in French as well as their skepticism about the French health-care system's ability to treat Covid-19 patients hinders their medical care and drives them to avoid it or to look for Chinese doctors of Western medicine and practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine.

Chinese migrants in precarious conditions are highly exposed to the financial hardships and the toll on physical health from the pandemic, and, at the same time, they have few resources with which to cope with them. In the following sections, we examine their daily trade-offs between financial

and health risks as well as the strategies they employ to find the resources they need.

## 5 Balancing Financial and Health Risks

As shown in Chapters 1 and 2, Chinese migrants in France became aware very early on of the dangers of Covid-19 and began to take protective measures early on as well, in February 2020. These measures ranged from wearing protective masks in public and when taking public transportation to quarantining themselves and their families, long before the French government implemented a national lockdown. As shown in the introduction and in Chapters 1 and 3, this is linked to representations of Covid-19 by Chinese political and medical authorities: supported by Chinese official media and social media, political and medical authorities described Covid-19 as extremely dangerous and advocated the need for radical control and protection measures at both the collective and individual level. Migrants who only have access to Chinese media and to the narratives produced in the Chinese context were very afraid of Covid-19 and tended to adopt radical protective measures in order to avoid infection. Migrants in precarious conditions, who only speak Chinese, followed the narratives produced in the Chinese context and tried to take all possible protective measures, but they had few resources. This is particularly striking when we compare their situation to that of newcomers who have good socioeconomic conditions, such as traders, entrepreneurs, managers at international companies, and academics at universities. These highly educated and skilled nonnaturalized migrants, in many cases, (1) started to self-quarantine before the national lockdown in France and, in some cases, spent the lockdown period in their large apartments or second homes in the countryside, (2) could telecommute, and (3) could take advantage of all the forms of assistance extended by the French state and the French health-care system, such as temporary programs for payment of a portion of their salary and temporary unemployment compensation programs.

Furthermore, in the context of the pandemic and having lost their jobs and almost all their income, as well as having limited access to the French welfare state, migrants in precarious conditions had to find the economic resources not only to buy food and basic necessities but also to pay their bills and make loan payments. To do so, they had to go out looking for food, whether that meant collecting food from trash bins, receiving food aid, or continuing to work (when possible), all of which raised their risk of exposure and infection. Also, as mentioned above, these migrants have few financial resources at

their disposal to protect themselves. For these reasons, they continually have to make trade-offs between the risk of infection with the virus and the risk of being unable to repay their debts and meet financial commitments. These trade-offs could be particularly wrenching when the physical threat of the disease is perceived as very significant and when finding the economic resources to survive is especially urgent.

Mrs. Jin, a fifty-year-old from Shenyang, went to France in 2019 on a tourist visa and decided to stay after it expired. She was very scared of the virus but, having lost her source of income because of the Covid-19 pandemic and spent her savings during the national lockdown, she needed to get back to work as soon as possible. For this reason, after the national lockdown ended in May 2020, she began to work as a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant. For her, the trade-off between exposing herself to the risk of infection and the need to earn money felt particularly extreme. This is how she describes it:

At first, I was so scared [about infection with Covid-19] that I cried every day. ... It was hard, and I was homesick and worried about infection. During the lockdown, it was okay to stay at home without doing any work, so we were less likely to be infected. After I went to work, I felt as if everyone was a possible carrier of the virus, but I still had to work. It was very hard. ... French people are not afraid of death, and I could not understand why they didn't protect themselves. In China, the pandemic has been well controlled. People were responsible and respected rules.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2021

This passage is particularly interesting: Mrs. Jin weighs the risk of getting infected against the need to earn money, a decision that was particularly painful for her because she is extremely afraid of the virus and yet needs to earn money to survive. This passage also reveals important differences in the way the disease is portrayed in the Chinese and French contexts. Mrs. Jin notices that those around her—her colleagues, the restaurant customers, and the French population—do not protect themselves (or protect themselves very little), exposing themselves and others to a disease that she perceives as extremely dangerous. To her, the French people around her do not appear to be afraid of the virus. She also wonders why, in the face of this situation, neither the French authorities nor ordinary citizens adopt the protective measures taken in China.

Like Mrs. Jin, almost all other migrants in precarious conditions have to balance the risk of infection against the need to earn money to survive. This trade-off was still painful but less fraught for Mrs. Zhou than for Mrs. Jin. When asked

why she decided to keep collecting junk to sell on the second-hand market, Mrs. Zhou stated: “If I get infected with the coronavirus, I can still sell goods, but if I don’t have money, how can I survive?”

Mrs. Zhou clearly expressed that she preferred to risk infection in order to earn the money that she needs to survive. An individual’s perception of the risk related to the virus shapes their attitude about it: for Mrs. Jin, the disease was a life-threatening risk, but for Mrs. Zhou, the virus presented a danger that she could manage. Although frightened by the risk of infection, all the migrants in precarious conditions whom we interviewed decided to go back to work. When they weighed the risk of becoming infected against the need to earn money, their financial needs took precedence. Many of these migrants resumed their activities to take advantage of economic opportunities that they can find in France. The trade-off between returning to China, where the circulation of the virus was under control at that time and the risk of contamination was minimal, and staying in France, where the virus continued to circulate, was strongly motivated by the economic opportunities and social protections that they believe migrants have in France. The case of Mr. Zhang and his wife is particularly interesting. Zhang, who is fifty-nine years old, and his wife were farmers in Shenyang. They went to France in 2018 as tourists and remained after their visas expired. Mr. Zhang worked at a logistics company transporting and unloading packages, and his wife worked as a nanny. This is how Mr. Wu explicitly balanced the risk of infection against the economic opportunities that they seek in France:

Our parents wanted us to go back to China because the situation with Covid-19 was too dangerous in France. In fact, when the pandemic began, they gave us money to go back to China. But we decided to stay even though the virus was circulating very quickly in France. I owed more than RMB 100,000 (approximately 14,000 euros) for our passage to France. Because of the lockdown, I didn’t work for more than half a year. I had to pay back the money. Also, as I don’t have a residence card, I won’t be able to come back to France if I return to China. I still want to live in France so that my children can continue to study. I earn more money here than in China. In China, my children were always sick, and it also cost money: they have been hospitalized several times. But in France, I can earn more, there is enough to eat and drink, and medicine is free of charge.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

These interview comments show that most Chinese migrants in precarious conditions were worried about the danger of the coronavirus, especially at the

beginning of the pandemic in France. However, because of their precarious financial conditions, they had to make a difficult choice between the risk of infection and the need to earn money to survive. In all cases, if returning to work had been a possibility, the migrants would have done that soon as possible.

This trade-off was perceived as particularly serious in the first phase of the pandemic, when the virus was portrayed in official Chinese media and social media as highly dangerous, and migrants saw it as a life-threatening risk.

## 6 Vulnerable Chinese Migrants' Strategies for Coping with the Pandemic

When the interviewees described how the Covid-19 pandemic had affected their economic activities, they also described how they dealt with those effects, and the strategies they employed to purchase essential goods or to obtain the resources they needed to survive, pay their rent, and protect themselves.

In the context of the public health crisis in which they lost almost all their income, they had to reorganize their household budgets. They had to stretch very small amounts of money, mainly their savings, as far as possible in order to meet their basic needs. The food assistance program was an important tool in this process. It was important for at least two reasons: first, it provided essential goods, such as rice, eggs, and other foods as well as masks, and, second, it enabled beneficiaries to save money that could then be spent in other ways, such as paying rent or repaying loans.

Mr. Sun, originally from Tianjin, who usually makes a living by scavenging and selling second-hand goods, took advantage of the food distributions from Love Alliance ten times. He expresses the value of the food basket that he received as follows: "The food sent by Love Alliance was worth about 20 euros, which could help me eat for more than ten days."

Some interviewees participated in the food assistance program regularly, on a weekly basis. Relying on a weekly food package enabled them to make their cash last longer, as they could use it for other expenses.

In addition to participating in Love Alliance, migrants received food assistance from other groups, such as Love Union (*Aixin Tuan*), comprising Chinese entrepreneurs and using the same system for distribution. Another organization was the local French group called Restaurants of the Heart (*Restos du Coeur*). This was the case with Mr. Qi, who came from Fujian.

Sometimes, a French organization sends food to my home, as for refugees. It is similar to Love Alliance, but it is organized by French people.

They work with supermarkets that have extra goods to deliver to people in need. They had delivery vehicles and they brought the food to my home. I came to know them when I was selling rags; they are a team. The main thing they brought me was something to eat, and the frequency of the delivery is normally two or three days per week.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, AUGUST 2021

During this difficult period, many migrants also relied on help from their relatives and friends. As mentioned earlier, during the national lockdown and the first phase of the pandemic, Mr. Liu, Mr. Zhang and his wife, Mr. Yin, and Mr. Wu all received money from their children, parents, and family members who live and work in China. This was also true of Mr. Sun, who is fifty-nine years old and supports himself by picking up rags on the street and selling them at the weekend flea market:

During the national lockdown, I just stayed home. In fact, I only had savings of a few hundred euros, which I spent quickly, and, then, my wife and children in China sent me money. ... I will not go out again to pick up garbage until June of this year [2021].

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2021

This is a reversal of the usual direction of money flows within families between France and China. Before they received money from their families during the national lockdown in France, many of these migrants sent some of their money earned in France to their relatives in China. Moreover, the financial support from families in China was rarely sufficient, and many of the interviewees also borrowed money from friends. As mentioned earlier, Mr. Qi, Mrs. Zhou, and Mr. Yi all stated that they had borrowed money from friends of as much as 3,000 euros.

Finally, many interviewees received financial assistance in different forms from the French welfare system. For example, Mrs. Zhou applied for assistance from the Family Benefits Funds (*Caisse d'Allocation Familiale*, CAF) and received more than 100 euros to help in paying rent. Mr. Liu applied for a disability pension and received 800 euros monthly. We conclude with these comments by Mr. Zhang, which seem to sum up the experiences of these migrants in a way that is both poignant and clear:

Since we arrived in 2018, I had been doing odd jobs, mainly manual work, unloading containers. I earned 500–600 euros. A few months ago [March 2021], while riding my bicycle after work, I fell into a ditch and injured

my arm, which started to hurt, but I do not have a residence card, so I can't access work benefits. My wife is a nanny, and it was easier for her to find a job. During the lockdown, the family for whom she worked was working from home, so they no longer needed a nanny. She didn't work for more than a year, and after the lockdown, she returned, and her salary went up to 1,200 euros. During the lockdown, we lived in a warehouse, without income. We ate noodles, and we first spent our savings and later borrowed from others from the same city [as we came from in China]. Our children, who are in China, sent money, and then we converted it into euros. We owed more than 800 euros in rent, but now we have paid it all. We do not want to go back [to China] now.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2021

We examine these strategies put in place by Chinese migrants in precarious conditions in France using the framework of the economies of scavenging and poverty described by Léa and Murard (1985). These economies are made up of small amounts of money and of irregular and risky income as well as of the exchange of goods to which a specific economic value is assigned (e.g., the food parcels). Facing a public health crisis and a loss of income, these migrants have to reorganize their household savings and expenses in order to find the resources to move forward. They first rely on their savings. However, very soon they need to find more resources to meet their basic needs. To do so, they accumulate several sources of income at the same time or over time; they benefit from different forms of food aid or food distribution systems, they receive help from family and friends in China, they borrow money, they renegotiate their debts, they access aid set up by French institutions, and, as soon as possible, they return to work and activities even if they expose them to infection with a disease that some of them particularly fear. In contrast to the cases described by Léa and Murard (1985), the economies of poverty and scavenging among Chinese migrants have a strong ethnic character; generally the employers of these migrants are also Chinese. Furthermore, these migrants ask for help from their families in China and borrow money from Chinese citizens residing in France.

Thus, by reorganizing their savings and expenditures, accumulating income from multiple sources within and outside the Chinese ethnic network, and resuming their activities as soon as possible, these migrants can scrape together the resources they need to survive and move forward until the public health crisis, or at least its most critical period, is over. These strategies are employed in order to respond to the risks presented by the pandemic by migrants who are the most vulnerable to its adverse effects, often those with the fewest resources with which to respond to it.



## 7 Conclusion

During the most difficult period of the public health crisis, in particular during the national lockdowns, the Love Alliance food assistance program enabled Chinese migrants in precarious conditions to find the resources they needed to meet their needs and move forward. This program enabled us to meet a group that is difficult to access and, for this reason, has been little studied. It also enabled us to examine how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the daily lives of these migrants in precarious conditions. In particular, we examined the exposure of these migrants to health and financial risks from the pandemic, as well as how they perceived these risks. We showed that, under highly precarious conditions, these migrants had to choose between the risk of exposing themselves to potential infection and the need to find the resources to survive and move forward. These trade-offs were particularly fraught at the first phase of the pandemic because many migrants perceived the virus as life threatening and the lack (or the scarcity) of resources available to protect themselves.

We also examined the strategies employed by these migrants to cope with the risks during Covid-19. These strategies are part of an economy of scavenging and poverty and enables migrants to find the resources to move forward. Migrants in precarious situation reorganize their savings and expenditures and accumulate multiple sources of income, but this income remains unstable and undependable. Vulnerable migrants find these resources mainly, but not exclusively, within their ethnic and community group. Among Chinese migrants, both those in precarious conditions and those in privileged conditions, including highly educated and skilled migrants (working as managers at national or international firms or at French universities) perceive the virus as extremely dangerous, especially during the first months of the pandemic (see Chapters 2 and 3). But those in privileged conditions can call on significant resources to protect themselves (e-health, self-isolation in secondary residences, access to health-care services, see also Chapter 11), so they face less trauma from the trade-offs between the need for protection and the need to maintain professional activity and an active social life than vulnerable migrants.

Finally, our study has shed new light on two aspects of studies on the Chinese diaspora in France that so far have been relatively unexplored. The first is interclass connections between vulnerable and wealthy Chinese migrants in response to the pandemic. The second is interregional links between migrants in France from Wenzhou and Northeast China. The entrepreneurs who organized the food distributions and most of the volunteers were originally from Wenzhou and financially well off, whereas the beneficiaries were almost all from the Northeast. In the existing literature, the relationships and the interactions between these two groups are often analyzed through the prism of

labor tension and exploitation in the workplace. Historiography and sociological literature represent the former as a group that largely consists of traders who arrived in France early in the twentieth century and are deeply rooted in French society and the latter as economic migrants who arrived in France more recently and are often exploited by the former (Poisson & Gao, 2005). Our study offered some new insights in this regard, as these two groups have interacted in a humanitarian aid setting. This chapter suggests that the public health crisis might be a moment when the previously established interethnic relationships between Chinese people in France (based on economic status and the region of origin) are being at least partly reshaped, forming new interethnic relationships and, to some extent, creating community-oriented solidarity.

Since Covid-19, these two groups do not appear to be opposed to each other as previous studies assumed. In terms of socioeconomic status, they are indeed a world apart and yet there are strong connections of many sorts. One can further argue that these two groups both have gained a renewed social experience. In a continuation of the thoughts of Marcel Mauss, donations of food in a crisis like Covid-19 are also the giving of one's spiritual essence, which obliges a continuous exchange of good will. While one group is that of food donors and the other group is that of food recipients, a reciprocal and multi-dimensional relationship could be expected in the future. In this sense, the donations of food may well become a historical event that surmounted both regional and class-oriented boundaries between Wenzhou and Northeast China communities in Paris.

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# Capitalizing on Opportunities during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Business Transitions among Chinese Entrepreneurs in France

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## Abstract

This chapter explores business transitions among Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in France (in five different commercial sectors: imports and exports, retail, catering, hotels, and tobacco) during the Covid-19 pandemic. After giving a historical overview of the development of ethnic Chinese businesses over the past century, the chapter examines the challenges that these entrepreneurs have faced during the pandemic, the strategies that they adopted in response to these challenges, and what enabled them to shift business patterns and commercial practices under these unprecedented circumstances. Before the pandemic, some Chinese entrepreneurs had already made the transition, in full or in part, to “integrating online and offline businesses,” “hiring beyond Chinese ethnic networks,” and “paying attention to the local policy directions,” which helped them greatly limit the negative impacts of the pandemic. The major findings in this chapter show that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the transition in Chinese immigrant entrepreneurship in France, from offline operations to digital business. However, the pandemic might not be the direct cause of this business transition; rather, it created unique conditions that facilitated the transition. During the pandemic, two unprecedented business opportunities opened up that some Chinese entrepreneurs have proactively pursued since April–May 2020: “fostering local production” and “seeking low-risk sectors.” These might be new trends for Chinese entrepreneurs in France in the future. This chapter suggests that, from a theoretical perspective, business transitions among Chinese entrepreneurs in France need to be examined beyond the framework of pure economic rationality, taking into consideration the intersection of new dynamics in Chinese migration to living country and the cross-cultural, cross-institutional and cross-border social engagement of the entrepreneurs before, during, and after the pandemic.

## Keywords

business transitions – entrepreneurs – Chinese migrants in France – Covid-19 pandemic – business patterns – commercial practices – coping strategies – digital business – economy – social engagement

This chapter uses Chinese entrepreneurs in France as an example with which to analyze the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on business transitions.<sup>1</sup> First, we review the history of the development of Chinese entrepreneurs in France and summarize the Chinese business environment among those with different social backgrounds over the past century, until the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereafter, we present case studies on business transitions among Chinese entrepreneurs in France in five different economic activities (imports and exports, catering, hotels, supermarkets, and tobacco) during the pandemic. For each industry, we explore the challenges they faced, the strategies they adopted, and what enabled these entrepreneurs to transition their business. Finally, in the conclusion, we summarize their strategies for overcoming these challenges, the key elements that enabled these entrepreneurs to make changes, and the two unprecedented business opportunities that have emerged.

This chapter uses both first-hand and secondary qualitative data collected through three main research methods. First, we conducted semistructured interviews with eighteen Chinese entrepreneurs in different areas: hotels, medicine, imports and exports, catering, retail, and tobacco. Their businesses are mainly concentrated in eastern Paris, especially the fourth, tenth, thirteenth and twentieth arrondissements, and in Aubervilliers, which is a northern suburb of Paris. Four respondents and their stores are located in Marseille, in the downtown area and in the Marseille International Fashion Center (MIF68). Four of the interviewees either have served or are currently serving as president of their industry association or in entrepreneurial communities in their home country. All eighteen interviewees are first-generation immigrants: several are skilled newcomers working in the catering and tobacco industries, and others have children who are also involved in the management of their businesses. Second, in order to fully understand their professional activities and work environments, we conducted participatory observations at their workplace. Third, we monitored media in three languages (Chinese, French, and English) on topics related to Chinese entrepreneurs in France dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

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## 1 A Historical Review of Chinese Entrepreneurship in France

The large number of papers that discuss immigrants' entrepreneurial identities and their entrepreneurial trajectories (Nazareno et al., 2019) since 2000 provides the theoretical basis for this chapter. Although these reviews are based mainly on cases in the United States and other English-speaking countries, comparing these studies with Chinese entrepreneurs in France helps us identify the differences and commonalities in the characteristics of identity and entrepreneurship among immigrant entrepreneurial groups.

The history of the first large-scale arrival of Chinese in France traces back to World War I, when more than 140,000 laborers from China went to Europe. After the war, about 5,000 to 7,000 people remained in France (Condliffe, 1927). During the same period, workers and artisans from Qingtian, Zhejiang Province, gathered near the Lyon train station in the twelfth arrondissement in Paris, mainly selling handmade goods (Live, 1992). At the time, Chinese businesspeople had limited interactions with the host society because of the language, the type of work, and living conditions. Like the early Asian immigrants in the US, they "were not connected to the social structures of the communities where their businesses were located" (Min, 1996). In the 1930s, many Chinese restaurants opened on the left bank of the Seine in Paris. Since the 1960s, Chinese businesspeople have established Chinese-style furniture and supplies maintenance, import and export, and retail businesses in the eleventh and twelfth arrondissements in Paris.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, another significant wave of Chinese migration went to France, which consisted mainly of members of the Chinese diaspora that left Southeast Asia because of political factors and wars. These immigrants developed a particular identity because their Chinese ancestors lived in Southeast Asia for several generations yet maintained their Chinese identity over generations of living overseas (Wang, 2007). In France, these immigrants established a community in the thirteenth arrondissement in Paris (Hassoun & Tan, 1986). The businesses frequented daily by the Southeast Asian Chinese community—such as supermarkets, restaurants, food and porcelain wholesalers, low-cost hair stylists, and insurance companies—formed a closely coordinated intraethnic economic ecosystem. These entrepreneurial structures also created employment opportunities for the ethnic group. Chinese businesspeople became integrated into the mainstream market as well, operating garment factories at low cost and providing sources for local wholesale clothing in France.

At the same time, businesses operated by entrepreneurs from Wenzhou (Zhejiang province) also boomed, from small-scale family workshops, notably

the “three knives” (cooking, hair dressing, and tailoring) to a large-scale import and export trade industry, including international production and sales chains connecting China and France. The four major Chinese districts in Paris in the 1980s were the thirteenth arrondissement, the nineteenth from Belleville to Crimée, the eighteenth near the border of the nineteenth, and the third around Arts-et-Métiers (Hassoun & Tan, 1986). Beginning in the 1970s, the immigration trajectories and experiences of Franco-Chinese businesspeople were more or less similar to their compatriots in other European countries. During the Chinese economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s, Chinese people saw Europe as a land of opportunity (Ceccagno, 2003). Consequently, a large number of less-educated and less-skilled Chinese immigrants quickly became wealthy in Western and developed countries.

Despite the huge differences among the Chinese immigrants living in different neighborhoods, their common language or family and ethnic relations helped create links among them. Through this network, Chinese businesspeople developed the characteristics of an “enclave economy” (Zhou, 2004). In terms of financing channels, Wenzhou and Chaozhou people used *qi hui* to raise funds in the early stages of business and had particular relationships within the ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> Small investment gatherings were held within the regional group. Similar to situations that one might find in Los Angeles or Singapore, using this system, Chinese entrepreneurs who did not have access to bank loans in foreign countries could start a business by relying on trust and reputation (Long, 1998). Wenzhou businesspeople in France, extensively studied by Wang Chunguang (2017), have experienced generational changes, and their business philosophy, strategies, and attitudes were constantly updated and adjusted. As observed in America, this shows that, as a whole, Chinese businesspeople continue to develop in the direction of the urban middle class. The theoretical analysis based on the “middleman” and “enclave economy” (Light et al., 1994) is no longer sufficient for describing the subsequent development of Chinese business in France.

From the 1990s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new Chinese immigration flow emerged. These immigrants were actively engaged in commodity exports and established small businesses. Unlike previous immigrants, they often arrived in France with the funds necessary for their establishment

2 *Qi hui* enable them to raise funds and to hold small investment gatherings through community-based relationship circles, usually within clan or kinship circles. In the absence of bank loans in a foreign country, this is a basic way for Chinese people to do business in France, relying on trust. It is similar to what is called *piaohui* in Singapore or *yuelanhui* in certain regions in mainland China (Wang C., 2017).

and actively participated in China's distribution chain as a "world factory" (Ma Mung, 2009). In the 1990s, an increasing number of Chinese businesspeople from Zhejiang and Guangdong Provinces initiated entrepreneurial associations. These associations have integrated the capabilities of Chinese business clusters and played an important role in the international trade production and sales chain (Li, 2002).

In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization, which created more potential for overseas Chinese businesspeople to purchase goods from China and enabled Chinese entrepreneurship to become more global than ever before (Li, 2021). Transnationalism has become an important feature of international entrepreneurship, whether through individual immigration, the diaspora community, or multilateral government organizations (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2004; Portes et al., 2002; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2015). For example, because of the progress of globalization, Sino-Italian entrepreneurs gradually began to participate in various economic activities in the international industrial division of labor, such as manufacturing (Ceccagno, 2015).

By the turn of the millennium, hundreds of Chinese import wholesalers had taken root in the third and eleventh arrondissements in Paris. They traded wholesale goods, such as jewelry, leather bags, and children's and ready-to-wear clothing, with nearly 700 wholesalers on the three main streets in the residential area of the eleventh arrondissement. This phenomenon of rapid development was mainly due to the tendency toward getting together quickly by family or acquaintance networks within an ethnic group and characterized by a high rate of Chinese employees (Spener & Bean, 1999). In 2003, local residents in the eleventh arrondissement began to complain to the government about the singular business model of Chinese businesspeople; as a result of this model, other businesses, such as restaurants and supermarkets, could no longer easily enter the market. At the same time, the municipal government of Aubervilliers, a city with large-scale storage facilities, opened its doors to Chinese businesspeople. Drawn to the ample space, lax policies, and convenient logistics and transportation, Chinese businesspeople who were originally located in the center of Paris gradually relocated to Aubervilliers. In 2015, according to the mayor at that time, Pascal Beaudet, the arrival of the first Chinese wholesalers in Aubervilliers in the 2000s "gradually snowballed," and the city had 1,200 Chinese traders and became the leading commercial hub between the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

The migration paths of Chinese entrepreneurs going to France vary in relation to the geographic area where they landed. Moreover, these migration paths

3 <https://fr.fashionnetwork.com/news/Aubervilliers-quartier-general-du-vetement-chinois,478562.html>.

can be very complex, in particular for migrants settling in big cities, such as Paris and Marseille. In addition to the Chinese entrepreneurs who immigrated directly from mainland China or other Asian regions, there are also those who arrived in France from southern European countries, such as Italy and Spain. After they settled in France, their migratory paths had a huge impact on their business activities and models. We draw a distinction between business activities carried out by Chinese entrepreneurs in northern France—in particular in Paris and the Île-de-France region—and those conducted by Chinese businesspeople in southern France, such as Marseille. In Paris, the Chinese entrepreneurs mainly buy the goods directly from China and sell them in northern France and beyond, in central and northern Europe. However, the Chinese businesspeople in Marseille maintain strong ties with southern Europe. In the import-export trade, they mainly purchase goods from Prato, in Italy, and sell not only to central and southern France but also to North Africa. The business migration experience of Chinese merchants and their geographic location after migration created different supply and marketing networks and market structures.

Since 2010, with the rapid increase in the number of students going to France and the growth of other highly skilled immigrant groups, Chinese immigration to France entered a new stage (Wang, 2020) in which the profiles and occupations of the Chinese in France became increasingly diverse. Their places of residence and employment also extended beyond the Chinese neighborhoods mentioned earlier. After graduating from college, some international students entered the mainstream labor market, and others started their own businesses. This new generation of entrepreneurs with high academic qualifications differs from the Wenzhou and Southeast Asian businesspeople who devoted themselves to traditional businesses. At the early stages of entrepreneurship, this highly skilled group of immigrants focused on emerging industries, such as the internet, and did their best to integrate the electronic business model into traditional industries, such as developing electronic platforms for ordering and delivery, developing programs for purchasing discounted goods online, contributing to the customized tour service industry (Li, 2019), purchasing luxury goods or goods for mothers and children for domestic consumers (Wang S., 2017), and opening Chinese schools and parent and child classes. At the same time, they mostly abandoned the saturated inward-looking ethnic economic industry and, instead, target mainstream French markets and even global customers.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, some Chinese entrepreneurs, notably those who are highly educated, had already made or partially made a business transition to “click-and-mortar businesses,” “hiring beyond Chinese ethnic networks,”

and “paying attention to the living country’s policy directions.” These transitions significantly helped to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic. In the following section, we analyze business transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic among Chinese entrepreneurs in France across five industries.

## 2 Chinese Business Transitions during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Challenges, Strategies, and Keys to Success

From the end of February to mid-March in 2020, before the French government issued the lockdown order, many Chinese businesspeople in France had already slowed down their economic activities because of the outbreak in China, which occurred earlier. After the implementation of the national lockdown in mid-March 2020, Chinese-run traditional wholesale and retail businesses and catering services were almost completely suspended. Very few could continue to work during the lockdown period. After the lockdown ended in mid-May, many companies with factories in China were affected by factors such as the shrinking market and a reduction in flights, and their businesses stagnated.

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for businesspeople but has also provided an opportunity for them to innovate and change. Our empirical research shows that the Covid-19 pandemic might not be the direct cause of business transitions but, rather, creates unique conditions that facilitate this transition. It has stimulated and catalyzed business transitions in the Chinese diaspora in France. Below we analyze typical cases in five different industries.

### 3 Import and Export Wholesale Industry: the Big Shuffle Catalyzed by the Pandemic

#### 3.1 *Historical Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic and Recent Challenges during the Pandemic*

After the national lockdown in France was lifted on May 11, the wholesale traders in the Chinese Import and Export Wholesale City in Aubervilliers generally resumed operations. Their target customer base is very diverse, including merchandisers in Paris and neighboring French provinces as well as other European countries. The Chinese Import and Export Wholesale City in Aubervilliers has some characteristics of an “enclave economy.”

The optical shop operated by Mr. Xia, whom we interviewed at the end of July, is located in Aubervilliers. Compared to the ready-to-wear clothing, groceries, accessories, and luggage sold by other Chinese entrepreneurs, the glasses sold by Xia are relatively high-tech products. In his words, “the barriers to entry [in this market] are relatively high, and technology and products are not easily copied. There is depth and breadth.” Xia, who was born in Wenzhou, went to France in 1987 and founded this import and export company in 1992. It currently has eighteen employees, and, although it is now run by his daughter, Xia still goes to the shop every day and plays a significant advisory role.

Xia commented on the historical changes in the import and export wholesale industry:

Beginning in 2000, when China joined the World Trade Organization, no matter who came [to the Chinese import and export wholesale business circle in Aubervilliers], there was a shop that had what they were looking for. It was so easy to do business. ... It can be said that the period from 2000 to 2020 was the most glorious time for overseas Chinese to do business abroad. ... I believe that since 2010 ... , more stores have gone out of business, and fewer have [opened a business].

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These scenarios describe a change in the trends in import and export industries in this region during the process of globalization. At the beginning, these industries had an extremely high number of characteristics of an enclave economy, and the rate of Chinese employees at enterprises was very high. At this early stage, wholesalers were all beneficiaries, but as the cluster effect reached its apex, internal competition appeared in the import and export market. This prompted entrepreneurs such as Xia to choose higher value-added industries and offer professional services.

Although Xia is still in imports and exports, he is not optimistic about the future of this sector, which he sees as largely weakened by the Covid-19 pandemic. He said that “the overall conditions in wholesale business circles continue to decline, but it has not yet reached the bottom. This [wholesale] business district market has shrunk and expanded. It is now 1,500 businesses, and it may become 1,000 or even 500 in the future.” This situation also threatens Xia’s business.

Chinese traders engaged in the import-export trade in Marseille have undergone a process of relocation similar to that in the Paris region. Many who were formerly based in the center of Marseille moved to Marseille International

Fashion Center (MIF68), an import/export trade center the suburbs built specifically for Chinese traders to facilitate their unloading of goods, storage, and access. When the business environment improved significantly, so did their business, but the sudden outbreak of the pandemic brought the flourishing business to a halt. During our interviews with them in Marseille, Chinese traders told us that, despite receiving some financial subsidies from the French government, they had difficulties, particularly because of the high rents and the loss of customers to the site.

### 3.2 *What Strategies Have Been Employed in Response to These Challenges?*

#### 3.2.1 Capacity of “Made in France” and Further Integration of the Ethnic Economy into the Mainstream

As Xia described, “Now we can acquire some local companies, because the price of assets has fallen. Chinese people can actually do this now; it is an opportunity. I am also thinking about whether to set up a factory that produces glasses here.” The objective of this strategy is to combine his own capital with French production capacities and encourage second-generation immigrants to participate in the management of enterprises in a way that embeds their high value and professional service businesses in French society.

#### 3.2.2 Building a Global Strategy

Xia stated that “every enterprise needs to have a brand and a sales network. Even if one buys a local business, one has to package and transform it into an international company.” He hopes to find suppliers for his business outside China, in Vietnam or India. In France, descendants of Chinese entrepreneurs, such as his daughter, are actively developing China’s high-end consumer market, trying to create brands and products that are “Made in France,” and then selling them to China (Wang, 2019). The children of business people like Xia grow up in a Chinese entrepreneurial cultural environment but, at the same time, are educated and learning skills in France, therefore, they are uniquely equipped to play an intermediary role in transnational trade that link the home country of their parents (China) and the country of their birth (France). This is echoed in the research results from studies carried out in other European countries (Thunø & Li, 2020). These descendants have a multilingual and multicultural educational background and therefore have more opportunities to manage transnational markets between China and Hungary (Nyiri, 2014). Similarly, because they are better integrated into local society and well educated, descendants of Chinese migrants in Portugal have the

skills to consider finance or other services, such as platform economies, when choosing a career, instead of simply working in their parents' industries (Gaspar, 2019).

### 3.2.3 Exploring the Online Economy

The wholesalers at MIF68 in Marseille have been actively seeking solutions to the problems they face: high rent and a lack of customers. The online platform offers them a new way out. Some of them are joining forces to set up online shops. For example, one of the shopkeepers at MIF 68 said that he joined up with two other shopkeepers to open an online store to sell goods initially sold in three offline shops in the shopping center. Thereby, they could focus their efforts and skills to reduce the cost and energy of investing in e-commerce.

### 3.3 *What Enables Businesses to Shift Business Patterns and Commercial Practices?*

Xia and his daughter need to not only investigate the local market more deeply and integrate into the mainstream French economy but also pay attention to issues such as the productivity level of different production areas in the world and the purchasing power in different markets. Chinese businesspeople have a natural advantage in understanding China's international trade policies and also have an opportunity to use future international trade cooperation (e.g., Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or RCEP, China-EU negotiations on investment) to achieve their own industrial upgrades. Xia would need to use his perspective as a vantage point from which to observe the dynamics of the entire industry, as well as increase his understanding of the relevant markets in France and in China.

Because the products traded by Xia are high tech—unlike other classic import-export products, such as clothing, shoes, variety stores, and bags—and his daughter is highly educated and trilingual (in French, Chinese, and English), the Xia family business can continuously interact with its network and country in a transnational society, while taking part in the socioeconomic and political environment in both the home country and the living country. In this sense, by achieving “simultaneous embeddedness” (You & Zhou, 2019), the Xia family business can withstand the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, as shown by Portuguese Castro and Gómez Zermelo (2020), the entrepreneur's personal characteristics, the relationship with the institution, and the human resources and business strategies available to the entrepreneur affect the company's resilience.



## 4 The Catering Industry: the General Trend in Online Operations Catalyzed by the Covid-19 Pandemic

### 4.1 *Historical Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic and Recent Challenges during the Pandemic*

The Chinese in Paris have very heterogeneous migratory trajectories, which affect their economic activities. For a long time, the Southeast Asian Chinese restaurant owners in the Thirteenth Arrondissement mainly served their own community. The Wenzhou Chinese businesspeople in the third arrondissement, who were themselves economic migrants (Hassoun & Tan, 1986), often catered to relatively poor immigrant communities in the early days. More recently, with an increase in new and highly skilled immigrants as well as second-generation Chinese immigrants, who have grown up in France, restaurant owners overall are better educated, and their understanding of the catering industry and ambitions for the market have changed.

The complex nature of the catering industry is largely manifested in the tight integration of the upstream and downstream segments. From raw materials to finished products to sales, it has higher requirements for freshness than other industries. Because of globalization and expansion by Chinese entrepreneurs into the mainstream market, small and family-style Chinese restaurants gradually merged into a link in the food-industry chain. Regardless of the type of restaurant, it can find suitable and timely suppliers in the food market, thanks to a tradition of intraethnic cooperation among Chinese businesspeople. As Xue, the owner of a well-known Chinese restaurant in Paris, said, "I am from Shandong. Most of my suppliers are overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and I also do [business] with many businesspeople from Wenzhou." The catering industry is more transnational than ever before.

However, at the beginning of the outbreak in France, many food retailers rushed to buy ingredients, which caused short-term headaches for wholesalers and shocks that were felt along the entire supply chain. Xue said, "For example, the price of rice in Chinese supermarkets increased, and my suppliers are all Chinese supermarkets based in France." Nevertheless, thanks to the globalization of the food supply chain, the soaring prices caused by this short-term concentrated rush were quickly alleviated, and the air transportation of particular ingredients also returned to normal much more quickly than did the flow of people, thus allowing the Chinese catering industry as a whole to avoid a shortage of raw materials.

Moreover, as the catering industry developed, it has gradually diversified from the low-end market, ranging from those with Michelin stars to midmarket

restaurants, and a single Chinese owner might have several restaurants, which cater to different groups of customers. Additionally, highly skilled young immigrants have created an online platform for ordering food in France. If this is an example of the integration of the catering industry into the global industry chain, it is also an example of business cooperation between overseas Chinese from different regions and backgrounds. Driven by the wave of digitization in business over the past decade, the Chinese catering industry in France and upstream and downstream companies have gradually created different business formats with online platforms. China has nearly two decades of experience in building online platforms, and the food delivery industry has also developed for nearly ten years. For a long time, Chinese businesspeople in Paris were relatively inexperienced in this online field. A group of skilled young migrants spotted this market for ordering food online and created the platform Waysia (ex *Alors-faim*) in 2017, which directly promoted brick-and-mortar restaurants of all sizes to Chinese and overseas Chinese through digital marketing. It encompasses the entire supply chain: supplies, restaurant launches, and delivery of final products.

The Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly the catalyst of this digital trend and popularized Waysia among many other restaurant owners. Li, the manager of Waysia, told us, "Before the pandemic, our daily order volume was about 100 orders. Now, this has probably increased by five or six times." Because online platforms have a large amount of industry data and provide a basis for reliable information in in-depth cooperation in the post-pandemic era, Li is convinced that this online platform could spread to the mainstream French market, introducing more authentic Chinese food to French customers and exceeding national and cultural boundaries.

## 4.2 *Strategies in Response to Challenges*

### 4.2.1 Cooperating with Online Platform and Logistics Companies

Before the pandemic, the cross-format cooperation between restaurants and online sales platforms was weak; this can be attributed to the relatively high service cost of the platforms and the fact that French customers generally prefer to consume food in restaurants. However, this collaboration improved during the pandemic. Although these intermediary platforms still have service costs, they expanded the French market's understanding of Chinese food, beyond Chinese ethnic boundaries.

The pandemic has had a great impact on the restaurant business, in terms of business models and targeted clientele, not only in Paris but also in Marseille. Before the pandemic, restaurants located in downtown Marseille targeted groups of Chinese tourists and offered packaged prepared meals. During the

pandemic, international tourism and tourism in general were highly affected, so these Chinese restaurateurs had to make choices in order to broaden their customer base. For example, some Chinese caterers, who are very concerned about the presentation of their dishes, did not originally want to sell food to go. However, because of the lockdown restrictions, they had to start operating online. By collaborating with several delivery companies, they gained more local French customers. Some caterers wonder whether they will continue with the takeout business model after the pandemic ends. The interviewees expressed doubts about these new business models. We analyze the reluctance of restaurateurs to sell online below.

Ms. Lang, a highly skilled migrant, is the owner of a Chinese teashop. She opened it in the 2000s, when, as she says, “new opportunities were possible for Chinese business owners. ... China had just joined the World Trade Organization, which changed how Chinese culture was perceived in France and gave us more legitimacy in certain fields.” She spent a lot of time traveling to major tea-producing regions in China. Because of the active development of transnational commercial cooperation, she selected the most suitable high-quality tea for the French market and entered the French market for mid- to high-end tea. Her business scope extended beyond Paris and France, now covering all of Europe. She also established partnerships with French luxury-goods companies. During the pandemic, online sales became an important part of her business. She was actively engaged in online sales before the Covid-19 pandemic and had diverse sales channels. She also worked with the French post office, which remained open during the lockdown, so that her products could be delivered to customers’ homes smoothly.

#### 4.2.2 Playing the “Good for Your Health” Card

Ms. Lang markets tea as a product that is beneficial for overall health. During the pandemic, she experienced an unexpected surge in sales. Ms. Lang said, “Many of our customers come to the store and say that they can’t drink one liter of wine or coffee when they are locked down at home, but they drink a lot of tea. ... Most of the people who buy my tea are health conscious. Many customers say they have to buy more of our tea.”

#### 4.2.3 Maintaining a Solid Partnership with Chinese Providers in China

The trusting relationship and friendship established by Ms. Lang with Chinese tea farmers and merchants played a key role in managing exceptionally challenging international logistics during the pandemic. She recalled, “Although it was difficult this year, our solid partnership with Chinese tea farmers allowed me to receive the new supply of spring tea this year, in May. I was very worried

that I wouldn't get fresh tea this year because of Covid-19." Of course, in addition to this well-founded and well-maintained partnership with tea farmers, this successful supply is also due to the fact that in China the pandemic was largely brought under control in April and May, and tea farmers were able to work and send sufficient supplies abroad.

#### 4.3 *What Enables Businesses to Overcome the Challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic?*

We conclude that, under normal circumstances, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese catering industry in France was already undergoing a business transition, particularly through the efficient combination of online platforms and offline services. The pandemic accelerated this business transition. China has a wealth of experience in areas such as network platform operations, and these technologies and digital supplies enabled Chinese businesspeople to experiment with digital business in the catering sector in France.

Moreover, Chinese entrepreneurs in catering gradually expanded their customer base and developed a wider market, targeting not only Chinese customers but also non-Chinese Europeans. This second business pattern shift enabled these entrepreneurs to mitigate the loss of turnover linked to onsite consumption during the pandemic. Finally, the deeply rooted transnational links between these entrepreneurs and Chinese producers in China ensured a steady supply and commercial chain even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As described by Korede et al. (2021), during the Covid-19 pandemic, ethnic minority restaurant owners in the UK adopted diverse innovative practices in order to survive, and second-generation ethnic minority business owners are more likely to experiment with innovative behaviors. All these innovative behaviors lead entrepreneurs to change their business models, making it easier to create value from their economic activities (Cucculelli & Bettinelli, 2015; George & Bock, 2011).

#### 4.4 *The Reluctance of Restaurateurs to Sell Online*

However, not all restaurant owners are willing to use online ordering services out of a belief that the complex cooking procedures and final presentation of Chinese cuisine are often "devalued" by the procedures involved in delivery.

A restaurant owner in Paris told us,

I didn't do takeout before, because I was doing good business, because I thought it would be bad if I took the best food home, and then after I closed the door at lockdown, a lot of people told me I had to do take out because I was alone, and I had to find someone to do it. It was fine, but I

had to find someone to do it. During the pandemic, the workers weren't necessarily happy to cook, so they didn't want to take the risk, so at first, I didn't want to do takeout, but later on, a lot of customers called me and said I had to do takeout, they wanted to eat our meal, so I had no choice. Then I participated in an online platform to deliver, but it's still very different from what is usually done, I do steamed buns, those who can send the whole lot out, try not to do sautéed meals, especially, for example, northern dishes, such as Lu cuisine, you can enjoy it on the spot, it's very good, but you cannot enjoy after the long wait due to delivery.

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This is not an isolated case, as the owner of another Chinese restaurant in Marseille expressed similar doubts:

This is really the time of the pandemic, we did not do this packaging when we closed the city; we said a long time ago that Deliveroo, UberEat, and JustEat all had contact with us a long time ago, but I refused; a journalist asked me how I saw the packaging, so I said I do not do packaging, and the journalist asked me why not. I said that I reject this commercial packaging behavior, but now I decided to compromise, I have no choice, we also have to survive, but in fact, I am really rejecting this commercial behavior, because I am Cantonese: we like to eat, the pursuit of taste is still very high, we still hope that guests can really eat the original stir-fry with taste, but there is too much uncertainty in the packaging process. So that this expectation is not achieved. But I am also very grateful to these customers, many French customers, I thank them for their understanding, they are very tolerant to accept this packaging, yes, in fact, I really thank them.

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## 5 Chinese Supermarkets: Different Sizes, Different Challenges and Strategies

### 5.1 *Historical Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic*

Today, many smaller Chinese supermarkets, such as Chen Market, still target the local ethnic community. Others, such as 37 Express, have gradually developed into midsize stores or even large supermarket chains, such as the Paris Store, which has more than twenty-two branches in major cities across the country and more than seven hundred employees. These supermarkets coexist without a fiercely competitive relationship because they target different

customers. Many Chinese supermarkets have a considerable proportion of local French customers in addition to their local Chinese customers—in other words, they have become integrated into French society.

### 5.2 *Challenges during the Pandemic Crisis and Corresponding Strategies and Solutions*

The three supermarkets we studied face different challenges posed by Covid-19 based on their size. Accordingly, owners have adopted various corresponding solutions and strategies. The owner of Chen Market, a small supermarket, told us that the store reopened on April 12, 2020. Mr. Chen said, “Many of our customers are elderly people living in the same district. They don’t know how to use online shopping tools, but still need to meet their daily needs. Despite this health emergency, keeping our store open is our responsibility.” A week after reopening, Chen said, “70 percent of the employees are willing to return to work, mostly men. That is thanks to a good relationship maintained with my employees.”

37 Express, a midsize supermarket, had a decline in its number of customers at the beginning of the lockdown. On April 8, 2020, two weeks after it began, the company initiated an online ordering service, enabling customers to shop at home on their mobile phones and computers and get their orders delivered via the postal office. It took a week to digitize the shopping process.

Most large Chinese supermarkets, such as Paris Store, continued to operate during the pandemic though with limits on the number of customers in the store at one time, following regulations by the French Ministry of Health. All employees are equipped with masks and protective gloves. To deal with problems in supplies at the beginning of the first lockdown, the company used a local supplier. In addition, it created an online ordering service, in which customers had to go to the store to pick up their orders.

### 5.3 *What Enables Businesses to Overcome the Challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic?*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the high rate of supermarkets owned and operated by members of the Chinese community contributed to a relationship of mutual trust between employees and employers. When employers asked employees to return to work, consult with them, and are willing to negotiate, employees are mostly agreeable. When they believe that hygiene and personal protection conditions are prioritized, they feel confident about going back to work.

Second, these Chinese supermarkets stock a diverse and increasingly broad variety of goods. Their products are not only imported from other Asian

countries but also supplied locally, enabling them to withstand the negative effects of the pandemic.

Finally, online orders and delivery services became a central part of the Chinese supermarkets' business transition, which moderated the loss of customers during the pandemic.

## 6 Chinese Hotel Chains: Continuing to Operate during the Lockdown and Mobilizing Employees to Participate in the Fight against the Pandemic in France

### 6.1 *Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic and Challenges during the Pandemic Crisis*

Wu graduated from Xi'an Jiaotong University, and then went to France in 1983 to pursue a PhD and completed it four years later. In 1993, he decided to start a business and, more than twenty years later, created the Hipotel Hotel chain. As the CEO, he operates 15 budget hotel chains in Paris, has 150 employees, and has more than 800 rooms, enough to accommodate 2,000 guests. The hotel industry has a lower rate of Chinese employees than the other industries run by Chinese businesses studied here. Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, this lower rate of Chinese workers is one of the key elements enabling him to continue operating his business, a point to which we return later.

Because of China's reform and opening up and continuous development of tourism as well as continued liberalization of Sino-French visa policies, globalization has given Wu a steady stream of tourists. However, the Covid-19 pandemic brought this kind of international travel flow to an abrupt halt. Wu had to replace his lost customers, in particular by developing the mainstream market in France.

### 6.2 *What Strategies Were Employed and What Enables This Business to Overcome the Challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic?*

Wu explored the mainstream market and participated in the fight against the pandemic in France. He said,

After [French President Emmanuel] Macron announced the lockdown, all the French people "disappeared" in one day, and everyone stayed home. For a while, I didn't know whether the hotel would reopen or not. ... We could choose whether to close our doors. ... Ten of them continued to operate, and the other five closed as soon as they had no business. So why did we reopen? We responded to President Macron's appeal. We

welcomed medical staff, police, state civil servants, and some social-relief organizations as well as homeless families who were at risk of contracting the virus. Also, during the lockdown period, domestic violence in France increased 36 percent, and some victims have been accommodated temporarily in our hotels. I believe that my hotel chains have made contributions to France's fight against the pandemic. If we close our doors, where will all the health-staff members, police officers, and victims of family violence stay?

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Indeed, in the absence of international travel flows, Wu made the strategic decision to turn to the development of the French market, finding new and special customers during the Covid-19 pandemic. This compensated for the temporary loss of guests. As mentioned by Ratten (2020) and Shafie and Mohd Isa (2021), the entrepreneur's keen business sense and timely business decisions are important factors in making the business resilient.

The second element of his success is the low rate of Chinese employees, which played a crucial role and enabled the hotel chains to remain open during the lockdown:

They [the Chinese employees] are more affected by what happened in China, their home country; all of them chose to stay home to protect themselves and their loved ones. They were reluctant to keep working in March, April, and even July. I can understand that. Fortunately, in my hotels, most of the employees are from other ethnic groups or local French! They kept working during the lockdown.

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Indeed, the employees of non-Chinese origin that Wu hires are less "fearful" of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the low rate of Chinese employees allowed the business to maintain normal activity during the pandemic.

All four industries previously analyzed were deeply affected by globalization, and the Chinese entrepreneurs that we interviewed are tightly linked to both China, their country of origin, and France, their country of residence. Our analysis mainly takes the theoretical perspective of "simultaneous embeddedness." However, some Chinese-dominated industries were not affected as deeply by transnational flux as these four industries. Next, we discuss an industry that plays an important role in local residential communities and was able to withstand the challenges of the pandemic and continues to attract potential Chinese business partners.



## 7 During the Epidemic, Tobacco Shops—a High-Threshold and Low-Risk Sector—Demonstrate Advantages

Tobacco retail stores, which is a high-threshold and low-risk type of enterprise, have suffered relatively little from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. France currently has 24,000 tobacco shops, and, because of a state monopoly, these businesses can operate only after obtaining French government bids by individuals or allied enterprises. In 2013, the annual report of the Federation of Tobacco Shops in the Île-de-France region showed that nearly 45 percent of tobacco shop owners in the area were members of the Asian diaspora (Le Parisien, 2014). The sale of various types of tobacco requires a license. A tobacco shop operator must have French citizenship or be a citizen of an EU member state, provide a certificate stating the absence of criminal convictions, and prove the absence of ownership share or management rights in other tobacco shops (one person can only own one tobacco shop), along with other strict procedures.

Under this strict market control, French governments rarely issue licenses, and investors who enter the market can do so only by purchasing existing stores. Tobacco shops, which are important in French culture, have continuously expanded their business scope and have become a meeting place for a wide variety of products and a constant stream of customers. Their relatively fixed profit mainly comes from commissions on tobacco and various handling fees from the state: these businesses are easy to operate, and owners can easily earn income by doing so. In this way, owners only need to sell enough tobacco stamps from the state to regular customers, even though their work intensity can be significant. After buying a business, they must undergo a short course of on-the-job training to fully understand the operations and rules in the industry. Tobacco shops in Paris and major cities are generally open twelve hours a day, six days a week.

Many tobacco shops run by the older generation of Chinese immigrants earn profits due to their hard work. Owners usually invest in the education of their children, as well as achieving social integration and experiencing a rise in social class. For example, a tobacco shop owner in Aubervilliers told us, “At the time, my main consideration was our young child, and this business was relatively stable. If I worked at other enterprises, I am afraid that I would not be able to have a stable enough income for sending my children to good schools. Now, two of my three daughters are at foreign companies, and they do not want to do our jobs.”

However, the new generation of Chinese migrants, who obtained higher education, is willing to invest in this industry. Weiwen, originally from Hangzhou, married and had children after studying in France, and then bought a tobacco and lottery shop in the western suburbs of Paris in 2002.

### 7.1 *An Industry Affected Very Little by the Covid-19 Pandemic*

During the epidemic, tobacco stores were among the few businesses allowed to continue operating. The day after the lockdown began, Weiwen opened the store as usual. Fewer customers came to the store, but business did not decrease. To reduce the chance of infection, Weiwen changed the business hours from eight hours a day to four, five days a week.

Another tobacco shop owner, Mr. Huang, is from Wenzhou and speaks fluent French. In 2004, his family sold a restaurant at the center of Paris, and he decided to buy a tobacco shop as an experiment. After the lockdown measures were implemented, Huang continued to operate for three days. Then, because of health considerations, his parents repeatedly urged him to close the store for three weeks. It was not until early April that Huang reopened his doors. He said, "When we first opened, we were only open for four to five hours and then only gradually increased. It was not until May 17 that we resumed normal business hours. It is clear that the pandemic has not reduced the demand for smoking." Huang added, "The customers are mostly of retirement age, and our guests wear masks to buy cigarettes and leave quickly afterward; their concern can be discerned in the tone of their voice." According to him, during the lockdown, turnover decreased by at least 30 percent compared with before Covid-19, but he did not lose any money.

### 7.2 *An Emerging Preferred Industry?*

The prices for selling tobacco and lottery tickets are regulated by the government, so profits are strictly controlled and lower than in other commercial sectors. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this industry experienced fewer risks and comparatively little investment and stockpiling, which makes it relatively stable. Huang said, "If you compare us with other nearby businesses, I am lucky. In France, coffee and tobacco shops represent the vitality of the city and the neighborhood and the affinity of the residents. It's one way to have contact with the outside world." The tobacco industry, considered a "stable industry," is therefore increasingly preferred for investment by the Chinese businesspeople whom we interviewed.

### 7.3 *Social Responsibility of Tobacco Store Owners*

Mr. He, who had worked as an elementary school teacher in Wenzhou, became a tobacco store owner after going to France. At the beginning of 2021, He heard from his friends that some Chinese had difficulties buying enough food because they had lost their jobs during the pandemic. This news touched him deeply, and because of that understanding, he noticed that many Chinese migrants living on the margins, and the majority of them were undocumented. Soon afterward, he contacted a former student in Wenzhou, who now runs

a G20 supermarket in Paris, to organize a campaign dedicated to supporting Chinese in need. In the spring of 2021, he organized sites for charitable food distribution for Chinese migrants living on the edge (see Chapter 8). He created a WeChat group to collect donations from more Chinese businessmen or Chinese friends and coordinated volunteers for buying food for distribution (including eggs, milk, flour, rice) through supermarket networks, organizing registration for events, and so on. More than ten distribution events were held, which served hundreds of people. Although they were designed to help people of Chinese origin and operated through WeChat, non-Chinese people in need were also welcome.

## 8 Conclusion

Over the past century, the heterogeneity of Chinese businesspeople in France has increased. This is reflected not only in the migration trajectory and social composition of Chinese businesspeople but also in the generational changes in the ethnic economy and the differentiation of the sectors in which Chinese entrepreneurs operate. Before the pandemic, some Chinese entrepreneurs had already made or partially made the transition to “integrating online and offline businesses,” “hiring beyond Chinese ethnic networks,” and “paying attention to the living country’s policy directions,” which helped them greatly reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic. Indeed, members of the current generation of young Chinese entrepreneurs are looking increasingly at local French distribution and logistics. Before the pandemic, these highly skilled Chinese migrants who migrated to France in the 2000s tried to differentiate themselves from the business models of Wenzhou, Chaozhou, and Southeast Asian Chinese merchants, who started out by importing and exporting traditional small commodities and managing specialty stores. These skilled entrepreneurs as well as their descendants looked at the mainstream economic market in France before the pandemic began, hired French employees, and sought French customers. These Chinese business practices observed over the past two decades have all gone beyond the traditional “ethnic economy” model (Ma Mung, 1994). This is similar to the general characteristics in the global migration economy summarized by Nazareno et al. (2019).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, the Chinese entrepreneurs in France who had already achieved or are striving to make business transitions have been affected by the pandemic relatively little because they already have mature digital operations, online ordering, mobile apps, and experience with delivery. This has been critical in turning crisis into opportunity during the lockdown.

Skilled newcomers and young descendants of immigrants play an important role in the digitization of businesses and in the management of multinational e-commerce. The existing Chinese business resources have a tendency to combine innovation in their entrepreneurial model with new technologies. The skilled younger generation is the main key in developing that trend.

The second important key to success is the diversity of the employees of these Chinese businesses. Our field materials clearly show that it has been much more difficult for Chinese employees to return to work than employees of other ethnic groups. In many cases, even if the Chinese business owner wanted to resume work or continue to operate during the lockdown, the reluctance of Chinese employees to return to work prevented the business from operating, except that Chinese employers and Chinese employees had already developed a strong relationship of trust. A low rate of Chinese workers, as in Wu's case, enabled continued activity in the hotel industry during the pandemic.

At the same time, the pandemic opened up two unprecedented business opportunities. The first is "fostering local production." The transnational production and operation chain was severely affected by the pandemic. This global business model of relying on production and assembly in a low labor market and sale in a high-consumption market is no longer feasible when the global logistics and passenger flow are nearly at a standstill. Because of the pandemic, France has realized the importance of "local production," especially in medical supplies and equipment. One Chinese businessman who seized this opportunity is Huang Xuesheng, who opened a mask factory in Blanc-Ménil, a northern suburb of Paris.

The second new trend that we identified in the field survey is "seeking low-risk sectors." Many Chinese businesspeople, particularly traditional import and export wholesalers of small commodities and ready-to-wear garments, began to actively seek "industries that can continue to operate even if the city is locked down again." The tobacco industry considered a "stable industry," is therefore targeted for investment by Chinese businesspeople.

In general, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the transition of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurship in France. However, the pandemic might not be the direct cause of this business transition; rather, it created unique conditions that facilitate the transition. Chinese entrepreneurship in France faces a multidimensional reshuffle of industrial structures, business methods, and transformation strategies. Being anchored in the French market, maintaining transnational ties with China, and digitizing and combining the physical industrial chain with online platforms have all become winning strategies for Chinese entrepreneurs in France to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic and successfully adapt their businesses. At the same time, industries that

satisfy basic needs performed relatively well in the pandemic. This prompted some Chinese businesspeople to begin to reflect on what constitutes a core industry in the living country.

Previous studies on Chinese overseas entrepreneurs usually focus on the structure of entrepreneurship in various industries, the ethnic relationship linking the home country to the host country, and the social integration of descendants over the long term. The significance of our research is that, relying on previous work, it explores the catalytic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Chinese entrepreneurial transition in France, over a short period and in the context of a global crisis. As the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly will continue to reverberate, this innovative empirical research on a French case could provide a model for similar studies on overseas Chinese entrepreneurs in other national settings in and beyond Europe.

Theoretically, our study suggests that business transitions among Chinese entrepreneurs in France need to be examined beyond the framework of pure economic rationality, taking into consideration the cross-border interaction between the country and the market. Chinese businesspeople are concerned about market trends and policies, as well as the business environments in both the home country and the living country. Cross-cultural, cross-system, cross-thinking, and cross-border activities in the two societies profoundly affect both globalization and changing trends in the post-pandemic era. We can use the theoretical perspective of “simultaneous embeddedness” to observe and understand the current and future major changes in the post-pandemic era.

A few final questions remain. Will the new business models studied here and adopted thus far by Chinese entrepreneurs in France stand the test of time during subsequent phases of the pandemic and afterward? What are the continuing impacts of the pandemic on the organizational forms and methods of Chinese businesspeople in various industries? What role will the next generation play in business innovation, as they take over family businesses during the pandemic? These questions demand follow-up to this empirical survey as well as continued fieldwork in the future.

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**SECTION 3**

*Citizenship, Mobilization, and Relationship  
to the Home and Living Countries during the  
Covid-19 Pandemic*



# Anti-Asian Racism during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences, Narratives, and Reactions

*Simeng Wang and Francesco Madrisotti*

## Abstract

This chapter studies the anti-Asian racism experienced by people of Chinese origin in France during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this chapter, using quantitative and qualitative data, authors first analyze the various types of justifications and expressions of anti-Asian racism—in other words, the experience with and reporting of attacks, discrimination, and stigmatization by different groups in the Chinese population in France. These heterogeneous reports reveal different degrees of awareness of racism and different understandings of “race.” They are organized into diversified narratives, ranging from the description of personal experiences to the inscription of these personal experiences in the evolution of French society and to the use of social science concepts and political rhetoric. Second, authors examine the forms of reaction, at the individual and group levels, by people of Chinese origin in France. The reactions range from distancing and avoidance to immediate personal responses to political engagement. Authors argue that the pandemic plays a role in the awareness raising and the fight against racism among the Chinese population in France. Through a case study, using the natural language processing (NLP) technique, authors examine the discursive evolution by the Association of Young Chinese in France (*Association des Jeunes Chinois de France*, AJCF), whose membership mainly consists of descendants of Chinese and Southeast Asian migrants. By analyzing the content of Facebook posts by the AJCF over an eleven-year period (2010–2021), authors show how the AJCF’s messaging about anti-Asian racism was designed and spread as well as the changes in how Chinese people in France think and speak about anti-Asian racism.

## Keywords

anti-Asian racism – Covid-19 pandemic – Chinese people in France – migrants – descendants – awareness raising – discrimination – stigmatization – mixed methodology – experiences – narratives – reactions – political engagement – fights

against racism – natural language processing (NLP) – Chinese organizations – social media – Facebook – WeChat

## 1 Introduction

At the time of its outbreak in China, Covid-19 was globally portrayed in some media as a “Chinese” virus (Sun, 2021).<sup>1</sup> This led to the racialization of the disease (Reny & Barreto, 2022), in which the virus is described as intrinsically linked to a country (China) and to the “Chinese” population. In various countries, people perceived as Chinese have been seen as carriers of the disease and therefore as a potential threat (Gao, 2021; He et al., 2020; Li & Nicholson, 2021; Roberto et al., 2020).

In this context, the acts of racism and discrimination against Chinese and, more broadly, Asian people increased worldwide (Ma & Zhan, 2022; Roberto et al., 2020). The racialization of the disease was accompanied by the activation of longstanding stigmas rooted in colonial and postcolonial history, such as representations of the Chinese population as “dirty,” “vicious” (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021; Li & Nicholson, 2021), and eternally alien. Recent forms based on a sense of political, economic, and geopolitical threat embodied by China were added to the old forms of stigmatization. At a global scale, the racialization of the disease and the activation of longstanding or more recent stigmas have fueled an “othering” process, which leads to the marginalization and social exclusion of people of Asian origin (Chang, 2021; Gao, 2022; Gover et al., 2020) and to decline in their physical and mental well-being (Cheah et al., 2020; Coffey et al., 2021; Haft & Zhou, 2021; Lou et al., 2022a, 2022b; Pan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020; Horse, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). In response, people of Chinese origin around the world have mobilized locally and transnationally, both to fight the spread of the virus and to fight anti-Asian racism (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021; Chang, 2020; Krause & Bressan, 2020; Litam & Oh, 2022; Ma & Zhan, 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

In France, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered episodes of more or less violent and explicit racism and xenophobia, ranging from distrust and avoidance to physical aggression and stigmatization in public (Wang et al., 2021, 2022). Before the pandemic, few academic papers addressed the issues of anti-Asian racism and struggles against it by the Chinese population in France, which were mainly discussed within the theoretical frameworks of “integration”

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1 This chapter is based on three articles previously published in *European Societies* (sup1) (2021), *Émulations* (2022), and *Politika* (2021).

versus “ethnic enclave” (Chuang, 2015, 2021), or of the “formation of citizen identity” among Chinese people in French society (Wang, 2022). The long absence of the Chinese and, more broadly, of Asians in the French ethnic and racial studies can be explained by a racialization and essentialization that considers them a “model minority” (Chou & Feagin, 2008) characterized by “social and professional success” (Geisser, 2010) and “upward social mobilities” (Wang, 2021). This racialization can then be seen as “benevolent,” with “positive stereotypes” and material benefits, even though they are still subjected to racialized power relations (Zhou-Thalamy, 2020).

In 2016 and 2017, demonstrations organized after the deaths of Zhang Chaolin and Liu Shaoyao showed a convergence of interests and political attitudes between highly educated migrants (students, graduates, skilled migrants) and people in the “Wenzhou networks” who had historically immigrated for economic reasons (migrants and descendants) (Wang, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Gradually, the scope of the demands by protesters changed, adding calls for “better security” in certain urban areas in a “fight against racism and discrimination” (Wang, 2019; Wang & Madrisotti, 2021). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the media attention to incidents of anti-Asian racism—partly via social networks and activist organizations—and the exacerbation of racist activities may have been a catalyst in raising awareness and fighting anti-Asian racism among descendants and first-generation migrants (Wang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

Using a mixed approach based on qualitative and quantitative data, this chapter analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the experience of anti-Asian racism by people of Chinese origin in France. We examine the disruptive nature of the pandemic in awareness of the reality of anti-Asian racism and the emergence of new attitudes and reactions to it by Chinese people in France. Moreover, we highlight the variety of positions and attitudes toward racist phenomena and the mechanisms and social conditions on which they are based.

From a methodological and epistemological point of view, we encountered both social and linguistic obstacles in our research. We conducted interviews in both French and Chinese. The use of Chinese enabled migrants to express themselves more easily in their mother tongue but produce some semantic confusion when interviewers talked about racism and discrimination. For those who grew up in China, their socialization and familiarization with the

2 In August 2016, Zhang Chaolin 张朝林, a first-generation migrant from the Wenzhou region, was assaulted by a group of youths on a street in Aubervilliers. On March 26, 2017, Liu Shaoyao 刘少尧, who also came from Wenzhou, was killed by French police officer at his home in Paris.

subject may be lacking. On the subject of racial socialization in China, scientific publications in the social sciences are almost non-existent. The term racial socialization [*zhongzu shehuihua* 种族社会化] appears a few times in psychology, when authors introduce into Chinese the notion of “ethnic-racial socialization” put forward in studies of youth belonging, self-esteem, and achievement in the United States (Yin et al., 2010). Spoken Chinese does not clearly distinguish between mere differentiation [*qishi* 歧视] and racial discrimination [*zhongzu qishi* 种族歧视], which basically differentiates on the basis of race or ethnicity (Brinbaum et al., 2012).

Depending on their background and degree of familiarity with the issue of racism, some migrants immediately understood *qishi* as “racism”, whereas other respondents needed the interlocutors to discuss the definitions of these terms. A semantic shift can occur, for example, when a respondent uses *qishi* to refer to different forms of discrimination during the pandemic, mainly discrimination based on regional origin or travel history. Throughout the analysis of the interviews and the writing of this chapter, we discussed the most appropriate translations of the interviews conducted in Chinese, to ensure homogeneity in the categories of analysis between interviews conducted in French and in Chinese.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the section 2, we use quantitative data to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the subjective experience of racism by people of Chinese origin in France. In particular, we examine the impact of the pandemic on the experience of anti-Asian racism in three groups based by their migration experience. Our previous work (Wang et al., 2021) suggests that respondents’ migratory experience and age might have an impact on the experience of anti-Asian racism and its forms of expression. We validate this hypothesis by examining the impact of age on the subjective experience of anti-Asian racism across groups based by their migratory status.

In the section 3, by focusing our analysis on the direct quotations of the respondents and contextualizing them in their life story and social trajectory, we illustrate the various justifications and narratives of anti-Asian racism.

Then, in the section 4, we examine the forms of resistance to anti-Asian racism—individual or collective—by people of Chinese origin in France. We show that these forms of resistance are linked to how our respondents think about and express their opposition to anti-Asian racism. As example of collective resistance to anti-Asian racism, we provide a case study: the Association of Young Chinese of France [*Association des Jeunes Chinois de France*, or AJCF], one of the main organizations for people of Chinese origin actively engaged in fighting racism. Using the natural language processing (NLP) technique, we examine the evolution in the content posted on the Facebook page of the AJCF over the period 2010 (when it was created) to 2021. In particular, we analyze how the AJCF gradually appropriated the term “racism” as a tool for collective action.

## 2 The Subjective Experience of Anti-Asian Racism between January and July 2020

In this section, we study the impact of the pandemic on our respondents' subjective experience of anti-Asian racism. In particular, we explore how respondents report experiencing episodes of racism between January and July 2020. Our analysis is not based on an objective measure of the racism, rather, we examine the subjective experience of racism and the tendency to report having been the victim of racist activity. In previous studies, we found that descendants of Chinese migrants and younger people had a greater tendency to report having been victims of racist attitudes beginning in January 2020 (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Through the collected quantitative data, we further analyze how the tendency to report experiencing racist attitudes varies across groups, depending by their migration status and as function of age.

### 2.1 *Experiences with Racism since January 2020 and the Subjective Perception of Being a Victim of Racist Attacks*

In our online questionnaire, we asked respondents whether they believed that they had experienced racism or any form of discrimination since January 2020. In Table 10.1, 30 percent of the respondents reported that they had been victims of racism or discrimination in that time frame. The rate is higher among descendants (37%) than among naturalized migrants (29%) and even more evident than among nonnaturalized migrants (25%).

We also asked our respondents: "Since March, with the outbreaks of the pandemic in France, do you think that racist behavior toward people of Asian origin have: (1) Decreased, (2) Stayed the same, (3) Increased, or (4) I don't know." As Table 10.2 shows, overall 60 percent of the respondents declared that,

TABLE 10.1 The feeling of racial discrimination since January 2020 across migratory status groups

	Descendants, N = 137	Naturalized Migrants, N = 35	Nonnaturalized Migrants, N = 209	Overall, N = 381
Feeling of being discriminated against since January 2020				
I don't know	44 (32 %)	11 (31 %)	57 (27 %)	112 (29 %)
No	42 (31 %)	14 (40 %)	99 (47 %)	155 (41 %)
Yes	51 (37 %)	10 (29 %)	53 (25 %)	114 (30 %)

TABLE 10.2 The evolution of racist acts since March 2020 according to respondents in each migratory status group

	Descendants, N = 137	Naturalized Migrants, N = 35	Nonnaturalized Migrants, N = 209	Overall, N = 381
Evolution of racist acts since March 2020				
Decreased	5 (3.6 %)	0 (0 %)	12 (5.7 %)	17 (4.5 %)
I don't know	13 (9.5 %)	9 (26 %)	61 (29 %)	83 (22 %)
Increased	111 (81 %)	19 (54 %)	100 (48 %)	230 (60 %)
Stayed the same	8 (5.8 %)	7 (20 %)	36 (17 %)	51 (13 %)

according to them, racist acts against people of Asian origins had increased. Once again, this proportion is much higher among descendants (81%) than among migrants, both naturalized (54%) and nonnaturalized (48%).

Overall, almost a third of the respondents report having been victims of racism since January, and almost two-thirds believe that racist acts had increased over the same period.

These responses have two kinds of explanations: objective explanations and subjective explanations. We could argue that, in line with the literature mentioned in the introduction, that the ethnicization of the disease caused an objective increase in racist activity and aggression against people of actual or perceived Asian origin. Although only few studies have examined the objective evolution in racist behavior toward Asians, some research tried to point out the objective variations (directly or indirectly) and suggested that the coronavirus pandemic primed xenophobic reactions, especially affecting attitudes toward Chinese populations (Vachuska, 2020).

We could also argue that, subjectively, the ethnicization of the disease and the strong media coverage in official and social media of anti-Asian aggression reinforced the perception of an increase in racist attacks on people of Asian origin and enhanced the feeling of being a potential target of this kind of aggression.

In order to gain further insights and more precise information from their responses, we performed a multinomial logistic regression in which we examine the effect of migratory status, age, and sex on the probability of choosing one of the four options. In our analysis, we look at the group of descendants of migrants (people born in France) and at the modality "increased" as the reference. Figure 10.1 shows the results of the multinomial logistic regression.

The likelihood of responding “stayed the same” or “I don’t know” versus “increased” is higher for nonnaturalized migrants (respectively 4.54 and 4.39) than for descendants, and higher for naturalized migrants (respectively 4.37 and 3.28) than for descendants. Migrants, both naturalized and nonnaturalized, are more likely than descendants to respond that racist attacks on people of Chinese origin remained the same or that they do not know whether racist attacks increased.

Two main considerations emerge from these trends. On the one hand, descendants appear to be more “sensitive” to racist attacks and more likely to view attacks on people of Asian origin during the pandemic as racist attacks. On the other hand, migrants seem unsure about how to define and thus how to recognize racist acts. Indeed, descendants seem to be more likely to state that they have experienced racist attitudes and to say that anti-Asian behavior has increased since the outbreak of the pandemic.

This could result from a combination of factors. First, the descendants have better language skills in French: they understand their social environment better and perceive the most conspicuous and the subtlest verbal racist attacks on them. Second, descendants have been exposed to racism and the anti-racist

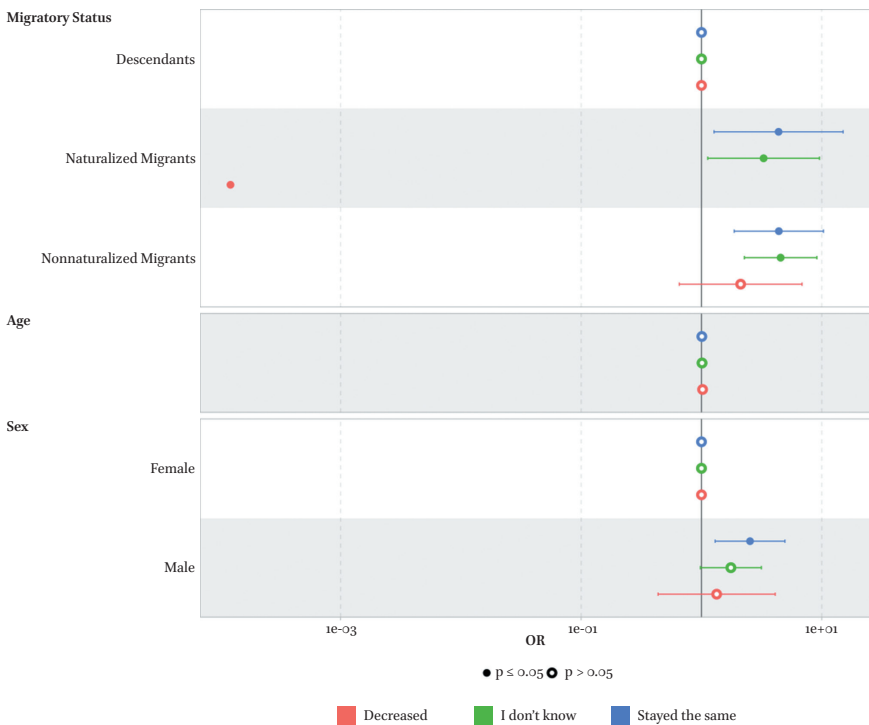


FIGURE 10.1 Regression estimates of the effects of multiple factors on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism



movement in France since their youth, and they also encountered the multiple forms of reactions to racism. But migrants, who grew up in China, have little or no exposure to racism. Moreover, migrants tend to limit their socialization to their own ethnic and national group: for this reason, they are less exposed to attacks by members of other groups. In addition, most of highly educated migrants in France are socialized in professional environments (e.g., multinational corporations or universities), in which this type of explicit attack is less frequent and is more stigmatized. In the next section, we examine the effect of these multiple factors on how our respondents think and speak about racism.

To better examine the subjective perception of having been a victim of racist behavior, we posed the following question to our respondents: During the Covid-19 pandemic, did you ever have to face any of the following situations: (1) People around me are afraid that I will infect them (yes/no), (2) People around me despise me (yes/no), (3) I have been insulted (yes/no), (4) I have been physically assaulted (yes/no), and (5) I have been deprived of certain rights: access to restaurants, bars, cafés, hotels, or other places of recreation (yes/no). Respondents could choose multiple responses. We recoded the responses to this item (no = 0 and yes = 1) and created a cumulative index that ranges from 0 to 5, where 0 indicates no experience with racist attitudes and 5 indicates experience with all the racist attitudes.

This figure 10.2 shows the respondents' experiences of racism. We note that 43% of the respondents declared that people around them are afraid

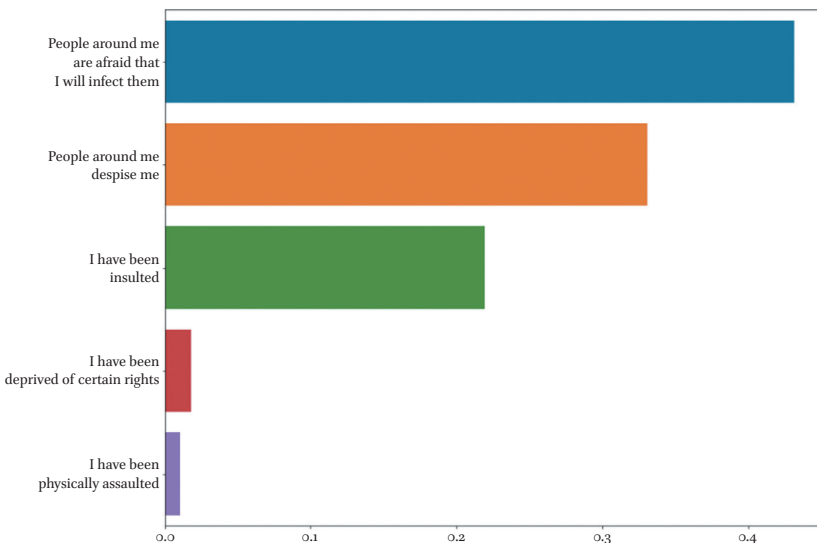


FIGURE 10.2 Experiences with racism

that they will infect them and that 33% declared that people around them despise them.

We performed a mixed regression analysis in order to examine the effect of age, sex, and migratory status on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racist behavior. We used a linear mixed-effects model, with varying intercepts and slopes, that estimates the fixed effects of migratory status, age, and sex and the random effects of age in the groups by migratory status and sex. Table 10.3 shows the results of this mixed-effects model.

Consistent with the results previously shown in Table 10.1, here table 10.3 also highlights that migrants report having been victims of racist behavior less frequently than descendants: the effect is strong among nonnaturalized migrants (-0.32, confidence interval [CI] -0.66/0.01) and naturalized migrants

TABLE 10.3 The effect of migratory status, sex, and age on opinions about the evolution of racist acts since March 2020

Predictors	Estimates	95% CI	p
Intercept	1.51	-0.30, 3.33	< 0.102
Age	1.18	-0.03, 0.00	< 0.009
Migratory status			
Nonnaturalized migrants	0.17	-0.66, 0.01	0.060
Naturalized migrants	-0.64	-0.87, 0.10	0.117
Sex			
Males	0.45		0.680
Random effects			
$\sigma^2$	0.93		
$\tau$ Migratory Status: Sex	0.01		
$\tau$ Sex	1.03		
$\tau$ Migratory Status: Sex: Age	0.00		
$\tau$ Sex: Age	0.00		
ICC	0.46		
n. Migratory Status	3		
n. Sex	2		
n. individuals	381		
Observations	381		
Marginal R-squared/Conditional R-squared	0.064/0.491		

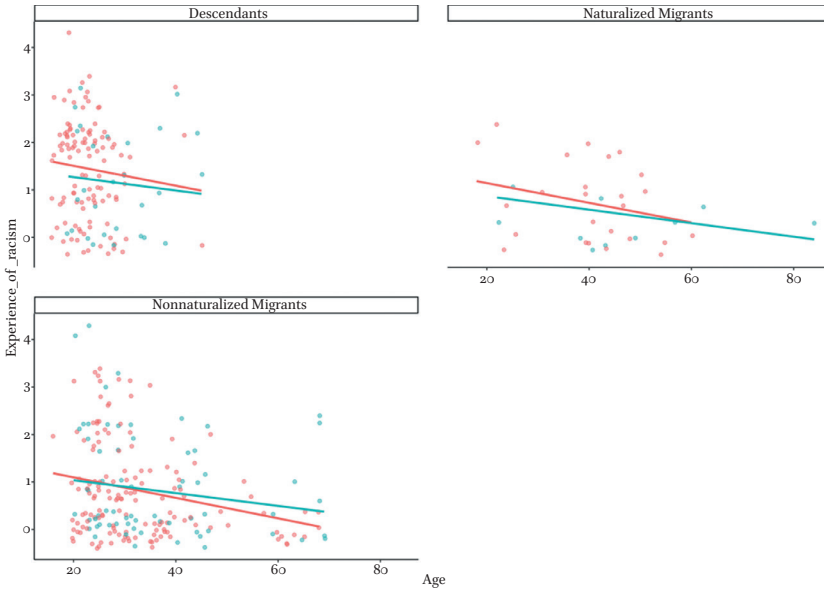


FIGURE 10.3 The effect of age on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism across migratory status groups and sex groups  
LECTURE: WOMEN ARE REPRESENTED BY THE RED DOTS AND MEN BY THE BLUE DOTS.

but, for the last group, the CIs are extremely wide ( $-0.39$ , CI  $-0.87/0.10$ ). Age has a negative effect ( $-0.02$ , CI  $-0.03/0.00$ ) on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism: older respondents are less likely to report to have been victims of racism.

Figure 10.3 shows the effect of age in all six groups defined by migratory status and sex, estimated by the mixed-effects model: in all six groups, age decreases the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism. The regression lines show that as age increases, people decrease reporting experienced racism. This figure also reveals that descendants and women (the red dots), especially young women, have a higher perception of being victims of racist attacks.

In a nutshell, the descendants have a higher perception of being victims of racism, and, among all groups, an increase in age decreases the perception of being a victim of racism. Moreover, migrants are more likely than descendants to state that they don't know whether racist acts increased or stayed the same since March 2020.

This tendency reveals different attitudes toward and understandings of racism. We already introduced the principal factors that affect these tendencies. In the next section, we examine how these differing attitudes toward and understandings of racism surface in the discourses of interviewees.

### 3 Denial of and Narratives about Anti-Asian Racism

In this section, we examine the different ways in which racism is expressed and the different systems of justification by our respondents: in connection with the tendencies described in the previous section, we highlight different attitudes toward and understandings of racism. In particular, we study the strategies of denial and the various ways in which anti-Asian racism is expressed. It will be shown that the differences in the ways that respondents express resistance to Asian racism are related to their different migratory status and their life stories.

None of the respondents denied the existence of racism and discrimination in France in general. Nevertheless, some respondents seemed to be in “denial” with regard to the existence of racism against Asians and, more specifically, to the forms of stigmatization and hostility toward people of Chinese origin. The majority of respondents in “denial” are migrants who have migrated to France since 1980, initially for the purpose of obtaining higher education. The respondents who acknowledge various levels of racism and react to it are mainly young people born between 1980 and 2000, who are either skilled migrants or descendants.

We begin by studying various forms of “denial” of anti-Asian racism. These “denial attitudes” are not exclusively linked to the pandemic period and, in some cases, precede it. We distinguish two social strategies at the heart of these “denial attitudes”: first, distancing from other groups (section 3.1) and, second, clearing their name through criticism of the Chinese political regime (section 3.2).

#### 3.1 *Strategy of Distancing from Other Ethnic and Racial Minorities and Other Groups of Chinese*

We distinguish two kinds of distancing from other groups. In the first one, people distinguish themselves from members of other ethnic and racial minorities, such as Black people and North Africans. In the second, people distance themselves from other people of Chinese origin, who are more marginalized than they are. We first look at the example of Qiaoling, a twenty-five-year-old student who earned a master’s degree from a *grande école* in France in 2020.

Personally, I have never experienced racism or discrimination in France, except for a few “glances,” which for me are neither racism nor discrimination. ... Here [in France], racism toward Chinese people is nowhere near as widespread as anti-Black racism. ... I’ve never had a problem finding an internship; it’s not like it is for Black people.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Qiaoling makes a clear distinction between the Chinese/Asian population and Black people. So does Mr. Zhang, a naturalized migrant who went to France in 1983 to obtain a PhD in science and is now the CEO of a hotel chain with more than a hundred employees. Zhang even distinguishes himself racially from other bosses:

Plenty of people have succeeded in French society—Chinese, Arabs, Blacks, French. If a Frenchman has a boss who is Chinese, he will be very happy and will say so. If his boss is a Black or an Arab, he will be more discreet. In the eyes of the French, the Chinese are superior to other ethnicities.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Zhang also demonstrates that the strategy of ethnic and racial distancing could be accompanied by also distancing oneself from more marginalized Chinese people. Indeed, according to Zhang, they are the ones who are victims of anti-Asian racism. He does not believe that racism affects people of Asian origin who have higher social position, which he describes as “successful men.”

You shouldn’t be too sensitive and categorize everything as racism. Free speech in an ironic tone is not always racism. ... For example, I have never experienced racism or discrimination, because I am a successful man in France. The French respect me.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Zhang and Qiaoling establish a range of differential treatment of ethnic and racial minorities in France that reflects a racial hierarchy. In order to deny that they might be targets of racism, they distance themselves from other ethnic and racial minorities. This attitude helps to forge and reinforce the “myth of the model minority” (Chou & Feagin, 2008), which we hear in the discourses of other respondents, in particular, descendants.

Zhang adopts a “classist” discourse to explain why he does not believe he could be a victim of racism. Several other respondents, naturalized migrants from a relatively privileged social background, employ the same discourse to

explain why they are spared from anti-Asian racism, in contrast to people of Chinese origin whose position is more precarious.

Fei, a twenty-four-year-old who arrived in France in 2015, is pursuing a master's degree in sociology:

Aggression and racism toward Chinese people exist, but they do not concern me. For example, very close to where I live [near the Strasbourg Saint-Denis metro station], there are many prostitutes from Northeast China, who are targets of aggression, both because of the fact that they are Chinese and because of the pandemic.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Cifeng, who is forty-four years old, arrived in France in 1998. She holds a doctorate in law and worked first as a lawyer and then as a Chinese language teacher at the university:

As far as I am concerned, frankly, no, I have never been yelled at in the street, no one has ever said to me "dirty Chinese," ... I live in the eleventh arrondissement, in a rather privileged area. Perhaps these are reasons to take into account, and, moreover, I work at a university.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

Although these three respondents deny having been targets of anti-Asian racism, they seem to be aware of it and take proactive steps to avoid having to face it. For example, Cifeng, at another point in the same interview, said that in the weeks before the first lockdown in France, she had decided to wear a mask in the Metro but took it off as soon as she got outside in order to avoid the harassment experienced by other people of Asian origin.

According to some respondents from privileged backgrounds, they had not been victims of anti-Asian racism nor had their children. They explained this by their "distinguished" social environment, in particular the school that the children attended: a Montessori school in the Latin Quarter for one respondent who went to France at the end of the 1980s to study medicine; a private school, described as "one of the best schools in the northern suburb of Paris with the postal code 93" for another, who formerly worked in the Wenzhou region but is now a shopkeeper in Aubervilliers. We also see this strategy of distancing among some descendants of Chinese migrants, such as Charline, a twenty-six-year-old tobacconist, who states that she has not experienced racism and thinks that migrants were more prone to anti-Asian racism than descendants such as her.

- Q: Do you think that you have personally been a victim of racism?
- Charline: Not at all. I've never had any problems, nor has my brother, at school or at work; we've never had any problems. ... I think it can happen more to people who might have an accent, who don't know how to speak French very well. So, yes, I imagine that they ... are more easily verbally attacked, and ... easy prey.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

In these cases, the respondents deny having been victims of racism by pointing to their personal merits or their social advantages in the living society. Next, we analyze examples in which the respondents attempt to justify racist acts against people of Chinese origin in France by framing them as the consequence of the “faults” of the Chinese government.

### 3.2 *Strategy of Distancing from the Chinese Political Regime: a Posture Related to “Outsider” Status*

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in China, Chinese management of the health crisis has been strongly criticized in the Western press and media. In many Western countries, China was viewed as responsible for this pandemic. In the context of confrontation between China and the West, some Chinese migrants fear that they are no longer welcome in their host country. This is particularly the case for young educated migrants who are trying to find their “place” in French society.

Thus, one of the ways in which migrants seek acceptability in French society is by separating themselves from Chinese authorities. In practice, this distancing is accomplished by criticizing the health measures taken by the Chinese government. In doing so, these respondents show that they are neither dupes nor spokespeople for the Chinese political regime but the contrary: they are individuals with strong democratic beliefs. These individuals also tend to justify some of the racist behavior they encountered in the context of the pandemic.

For example, Feng, a twenty-five-year-old from Wuhan who has a degree in translation and communication, describes the containment measures taken by the Chinese government as “excessive.” She says that since she arrived in France in 2015, she has never experienced racism. She admits that, since Covid-19 broke out, when she takes public transportation with her partner (a Frenchman of Chinese origin), some passengers “have looked at them strangely” or changed trains. But she says that “it is normal. Everyone has their

own choices and ideas.” She says that she was not affected by these incidents. However, she admits half-heartedly that in the future she could be a victim of discrimination on the French job market, but blames the Chinese government because its politics provokes (legitimate) indignation among the French:

I don't know if discrimination affects the labor market. ... I don't know if overseas Chinese will be affected. ... Most educated or kind people know that the country and the individual can be separated. If they know you personally, they don't discriminate against you because of your country of origin. But if China makes decisions that cause public outrage, I don't know whether most people will have a bad impression of China, ... that's all I'm worried about.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Meng, a thirty-one-year-old migrant and a student in sound engineering, goes even further in his attack on the Chinese government. In discussions with his French professors and friends in January and February, he regularly denounced the Chinese government's “lies” about the number of deaths from Covid-19. In our interview, he argues that the Chinese government was to blame for letting coronavirus spread outside the country. For Meng, the fundamental reason for this error was the lack of democracy in China:

The Chinese government lied to everyone, letting everyone believe that this is the flu. How would you describe this? It is [a decision] against humanity.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Meng asserts that in France, “there has never been any racism toward Chinese people since the beginning of the pandemic.” According to him, the term “Chinese virus,” which was widely circulated between January and March 2020, was not racist because “the source of the virus is in China, just as the Spanish flu was a hundred years ago,” and “many epidemics have been named after their place of origin.” It seems that denunciation of the shortcomings of the Chinese government prevents overseas Chinese from protesting the stigmatization of Chinese people.

The discursive attitude of these two respondents—criticizing the Chinese government, on the one hand, and justifying acts of Sinophobia, on the other—might seem surprising in the context of the increase in racist activities against Asians in France. But if we examine their migratory paths, these attitudes are more understandable. Indeed, in both cases, the respondents do not



intend to return to China; rather, they seek to settle in France after completing their studies. They are “outsiders” who aspire to integrate into the established group: the French society (Elias & Scotson, 1997). From this perspective, blaming the Chinese authoritarian regime is not a simple expression of an existing political view. By blaming the Chinese government, these respondents want to affirm their unconditional adherence to democracy and freedom, the flagship values of their host country. This affirmation entitles them to be perceived by their French interlocutors as having “integrated.” At the same time, they distinguish themselves from the authoritarian regime of their country of origin and position themselves among “democratic peoples.” Finally, the process of identification with French society involves its idealization. Thus, for these young Chinese migrants, criticism of the Chinese political regime and denial of racism in French society signal both their desire to emancipate themselves from their society of origin and to integrate into the host society.

In sum, the common characteristic of these individuals is their tendency to minimize racism, to seek justifications for racist actions, and to emphasize “fear of the virus,” rather than “fear of the Other.” This attitude pits them against those who voice or denounce racism during the pandemic.

### 3.3 *Anti-Asian Racism Is Expressed in Multiple Ways*

In this section, we explore the various discourses that acknowledge anti-Asian racism in France as well as the multiple ways of thinking about it and expressing that awareness, which takes different paths at different times among the Chinese in France. Even among those who acknowledge anti-Asian racism in France, it is expressed at various registers, ranging from description of an existing but marginal phenomenon to denunciation of a phenomenon rooted in French society.

#### 3.3.1 The Role of Covid-19 in the Awareness and Expression of Racism

The Covid-19 crisis plays a particular role in the awareness and expression of racism. In France, since January 2020, many migrants have been exposed to extremely violent racism that they had thought unimaginable before the crisis. Yuelin, a twenty-three-year-old law student, recounts:

I heard about people getting shampooed [people having soap thrown at them by strangers] on the subway, and it's a scary feeling. ... A lot of people heard about that happening; some articles about it were posted on WeChat.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

The fear of being attacked could cause self-censorship. This is the case of Jia, a twenty-five-year-old master's-degree student in Montpellier who, having learned about the attacks on Chinese students since February 2020, decided to go out less and not wear a mask in public. For these migrants, the Covid-19 crisis created a troubling moment, as it reveals a racism that they did not know existed and that they did not expect. Indeed, they did not grow up in China with an awareness of race, and, during the Covid-19 crisis, they faced racist attacks for the first time, sometimes violent. These people describe the racism they have experienced (or witnessed) in a descriptive, rather than analytical way; the statement of racism is thus limited to a description of individual or collective experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In their discourses, descendants demonstrate greater familiarity with the phenomenon of anti-Asian racism. However, the Covid-19 pandemic may still have played a triggering role in some people's awareness of their own vulnerability to racism. Amanda, a twenty-three-year-old descendant and a working business school student, recalls episodes of racism that she witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic:

I experienced racist situations, such as people keeping their distance from me on the bus because I'm of Chinese descent. ... At my university, someone of Chinese origin coughed and was harassed. ... I think racism was there before, but it became more visible, and there was something about Covid that made me feel more concerned.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

Amanda says that she had not really been aware of anti-Asian racism and that she discovered it during the Covid-19 pandemic. This account illustrates that the multiple acts of racism, especially media coverage of them, led people of Chinese origin to apprehend racism as something that concerns them. Indeed, the many accounts of incidents in the media enable individuals to raise their own lived experiences to a collective level, which had not been analyzed as racism, and lead to new interpretations of past experiences.

Other descendants in their twenties, unlike Amanda, say that they were aware of racism before the Covid-19 pandemic. These young people look at racism as a long-term phenomenon and speak about racist experiences they had experienced since they were young, often at school; they also describe evolution in this racist behavior and their collective perception over time: some insults and some forms of aggressions had become increasingly recognized as "racist" and directed at Asians. In describing the process of becoming aware of the anti-Asian racism, our respondents often evoke the deaths of Zhang Chaolin and Liu

Shaoyao (see note 2) as well as the demonstrations that followed, as symbolic and decisive moments that triggered a collective response within the Chinese communities in the face of racism. For example, Antoine, a twenty-three-year-old descendant and law student, describes his experience with racism as follows:

Antoine: I think that the attacks [experienced by people of Asian descent during the pandemic] are racist. ... It is the same as before the pandemic; it's just that now these attacks are related to the virus. ... The racism itself and the seed of racism have always been there.

Q: And you were already aware before that there was racism toward Asians?

Antoine: Yes, I even noticed that it was more and more recognized, still not enough, but more and more. ... There were even people who reacted to racist behavior toward me, whereas before I was absolutely alone in the world ... and it shocked absolutely nobody. ... In my distant memories, [forms of racism that I experienced] were the children who didn't want to play with me because I was a "dirty chink," and when I tell the teachers: "they don't want to play with me, because I'm Chinese," she laughs. ... And afterward, when I was in middle school, we were two Asians ..., and "dirty Chinese shit," expressions like that were used freely, and every time I seemed hurt, people thought that it was because there was "dirty" and "shit" in it. But that wasn't the problem. It's not the insult, because I can take a racist insult. What hurts is that people don't realize that it's a racist insult. ... I feel as if it's changed since [that time] but there is still a long way to go. But, yeah, it's changed a little bit. ... However, I feel as if, during Covid, racism was completely unleashed. ... But I have the impression that there is also an awakening of the Asian community in France with regard to racism. Maybe three or four years ago, a Chinese man [Liu Shaoyao] in the nineteenth arrondissement was killed by the police in his home. ... So, some young Asians demonstrated, and it became somewhat violent. ... which I think kind of brought this story to light.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JUNE 2020

Thus, in comparison to Chinese migrants, descendants demonstrate greater familiarity with the concept of racism. For first-generation skilled migrants,

the Covid-19 crisis is the main indicator of this racism, while, for others, especially descendants, it is only one manifestation of more longstanding racism, which is part of French history. Below, we discuss that racism is expressed in multiple registers.

### 3.3.2 Racism Is Qualified and Stated in Multiple Ways

The respondents do not express racism in the same way. Indeed, for some respondents, talking about racism during the interviews satisfied a real need for them to express themselves. Other respondents acknowledge the existence of racism but talk about it only in order to answer our questions, without showing any desire to say more about it. This was the case with one respondent, who works as a cashier at a Chinese supermarket in Aubervilliers, whose interview was very brief.

Q: Have you experienced racism and discrimination [at work]?

A: Well, my French is not good, so it's certain that there is some; people bother me on purpose.

Q: And when you encounter this kind of situation, how do you react?

A: No choice (laughs)—we can only let them go.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Other respondents, more fluent in French and more familiar with the phenomenon of racism, describe their experiences by borrowing scientific and activist terms. This is the case with Camille, a descendant of Chinese immigrants (fourth generation) and a master's student in sustainable development who was born on Réunion Island.

For me, it's important to tell the French public that they shouldn't believe that this racism was born with Covid and will end with it; this racism has systemic institutional roots, and it's not going to just end.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

By employing the term “systemic institutional roots,” Camille seems to be referring to racism in its sociological sense. In the same way, the term “racialized”—mentioned by Camille as well as other respondents, which is notably distinguished from “White”—shows a mastery of the concept of racism and the capacity to mobilize the scholarly or militant vocabulary of “race.” These analytical skills reflect their participation and exposition to discussions or debates on this topic. In the same way, other respondents, for example, mention the concept of the “model minority myth” to talk about anti-Asian racism.

Denis, a twenty-one-year-old descendant who works at his parents' grocery store, can define and conceptualize this "myth" and deconstruct it:

Well, I find [the myth of the model minority] stupid. ... All the preconceived ideas about Asians—that they are good workers, that they are good at math—well, I am the perfect example of how this myth is false! I'm sorry, but you can see me using a calculator, even for one euro, 1+1.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JULY 2020

These different understandings of racism are also linked to different degrees of politicization (or not) in relation to racism. In this respect, Camille's case seems to illustrate how her awareness structures the ways in which she calls out and denounces racism. Camille was gradually sensitized and achieved awareness of existing anti-Asian racism during her youth. From the feeling of "disorientation" and of being "seen as a foreigner" in her own country when she arrived in France for her studies to the contradictory feeling of "familiarity" when she arrived in China later, during an exchange program: her experiences in different places and countries where she is perceived differently, as well as her own multiple cultural roots, drive her to engage in strong reflexivity and reveal to her the structural racism rooted in French society. From this perspective, anti-Asian racism preceded the Covid-19 crisis and, according to her, should not be regarded separately from racism against other minorities, because it is one of many expressions of the same phenomenon. However, the pandemic made anti-Asian racism more obvious and pushed a community that Camille defines as having been made invisible to react:

[The French media] did not take seriously the people behind it. We Chinese still had no personality, so, the media used the term "the yellow peril." They said that we were burying "pokemons,"<sup>3</sup> and, there was a wave of unabashed racism even more embedded in the media. ... These things have been around for a long time, but during the pandemic, it has been more concentrated.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

3 In April 2020, when the French TV channel BFMTV broadcasted images of ceremonies in China, including three minutes of silence in honor of the Chinese victims of Covid-19, Emmanuel Lechypre, an economic affairs commentator, said: "They're burying Pokémon"; *Le Parisien*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.leparisien.fr/international/coronavirus-bourde-sur-bfm-en-plein-hommage-pour-les-morts-de-chine-04-04-2020-8293965.php>.

Camille emphasizes that racism is manifested not only in physical or verbal attacks but also in how people of Chinese origin have been essentialized, dehumanized, and reduced to an indistinct multitude, to puppets, to “pokemons.” What is most shocking, according to Camille, is the fact that this racist behavior is normalized in ordinary daily relations and in media discourse. Moreover, this racism “has always been there,” but its normalized and anodyne character enables its expression and, at the same time, its concealment. Camille’s reflexivity and awareness also reveal generational conflicts within her own family, in which different positions emerge. Camille blames her father for being in denial, for not being aware of the racism that exists in French society and, inversely, for perpetuating it:

My father holds a very French position, and it is quite annoying. He sees himself as a Frenchman that people see as French. So, sometimes he forgets that he is of completely Chinese origin. And so, in reaction to all the racist attacks, he says, “Well, no, it’s not serious.” Or he says, “Camille, you should thank France for everything it has done for you; you should stop complaining all the time”—as if I have a duty to France, and I should thank France and kneel down to it.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Thus, even those who recognize and denounce racism have to take into account the multiple and different social meanings ascribed by these respondents to the term “racism.” Discussions of anti-Asian racism involve multiple understandings and apprehensions of racism, which are linked to different degrees of politicization regarding racism. These different ways of conceptualizing racism lead to the different ways of reacting to and fighting (or not) racism.

#### 4 Reactions to Racism

In this section, we analyze the different types of reactions to racism, focusing on reactions to attacks that our respondents interpreted as “racist.” We show that, in the face of racist incidents and based on how they are conceptualized by the respondents, the many types of reaction range from distancing and avoidance to immediate and personal reaction to political engagement. We show that the people who react in the most individual and collective ways to racism during the pandemic are the youngest and most educated respondents, mainly skilled migrants and descendants with different degrees of commitment in their struggle against anti-Asian racism.

#### 4.1 *Individual Reactions, from Avoidance to Direct Confrontation*

As seen earlier, some respondents experienced racism for the first time during the Covid-19 pandemic and are unfamiliar with its different manifestations. In this context, their reaction might be preceded by moments of indecision or hesitation and may tend to engage in avoidance or distancing.

Jianhe, a thirty-year-old doctoral student who had not experienced racism before the pandemic, describes his reaction when, while in a park with Chinese friends, some children pointed at them and shouted, “Chinese people have the virus”:

I was just ... embarrassed. He was just a kid. There's nothing you can do about it. ... You can't say to his parents, “Your kid said the Chinese brought the virus.” That can make people feel as if you're being overly sensitive or you're picking on the kids.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2020

Feeling embarrassed, Jianhe prefers to avoid responding. However, this incident made him aware that he can be the target of racist behavior and prompted him to share his experience with his friends and on social networks.

In other cases, awareness of racism leads to a more direct reaction. Jia, a master's student at the University of Montpellier, tells us that when she went into a grocery store with a friend to buy a drink, she heard the shopkeeper say the word “virus”; she also noticed that when she was about to pay, the shopkeeper had tripled the price. In reaction, she publicly accused him of being “racist” and decided to leave without buying anything. For Jia, the shopkeeper's behavior was clearly racist. She was angry and reacted to it by denouncing this behavior, refusing to pay, and leaving. Jia acts as an individual, with an instantaneous and public reaction that shows the conviction with which Jia considers this experience racist, and how unjust and contemptible she finds it.

Through these examples, we see that different levels of awareness of racism correspond to different types of reactions, ranging from avoidance to direct and public denunciation. These direct reactions can be followed by delayed reactions that are manifested in the denunciation of racist acts through social networks.

#### 4.2 *From Individual Reactions to the Collective Mobilization of First-Generation Migrants*

During the pandemic, the denunciation of experiences with racism (directly experienced or witnessed) can be made on social networks. The media coverage of anti-Asian racist attacks encourages the organization of collective

reactions. For example, that is the case with the collective “Audio, Video, Exprimō” (AVE; I hear, I see, I express myself), created in February 2020 by Yi, a former student in international trade, who lives in Marseille and posted on the Facebook group “*Les Chinois en France*” a call for participants in a short film to fight racism, combat stereotypes, and let the voices of Chinese migrants engaged in the struggle against Covid-19 be heard.

About fifty people of Chinese origin, mostly migrants, responded to this call. The film made by AVE, “Documentary on the Covid-19 Epidemic,” was first broadcast on March 7, 2020, and it has been viewed over 22 million times since then (Wang & Groupe “Audio, Video, Exprimō,” 2020).

The collective mobilization of the AVE group dovetails with actions by the Free Hugs collective started by a dozen people, most of whom are Chinese students. The Free Hugs collective engaged in symbolic performance at Trocadero Square and in front of the Opera in Paris: wearing masks, members of the collective offered hugs to passersby and displayed signs that said, “I am not a virus” and “I protect myself, I protect you.” The collective adopted a double strategy: direct actions in public to raise awareness among passersby through “face-to-face” exchanges, and indirect actions through social networks that aim to reach a larger public.

The collective actions described above are initiated by migrants at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic; other collective mobilizations are older and began long before the health crisis—for example, Ms. Cai, forty-five-year-old shopkeeper and practitioner of Chinese medicine, who originates from Wenzhou and went to France in 1988 at the age of twelve. In 1995, she became involved in volunteer activities and translations to help people from Wenzhou who did not master the French administrative procedures. In the 2000s, and in cooperation with Chinese business associations, Cai became an activist about security issues and defended other French citizens of Chinese origin who had been attacked and robbed in certain neighborhoods in Paris. Cai was an initiator of the demonstrations organized in neighborhoods of the Belleville in 2010 and later, in 2016 and 2017, denounced insecurity and police violence after the deaths of Zhang Chaolin and Liu Shaoyao. Since February 2020, she has supported Chinese organizations that respond to episodes of racism and discrimination experienced by children of Chinese origin at school as well as by shopkeepers and residents in Department 93.

Ever since January 2020, in conjunction with the pandemic, the terms “discrimination” and “racism” have become more common in Cai’s speeches and in her activism. On March 24, 2021, five young men were on trial at a Paris court for making calls for violence and hate against Chinese people on Twitter when the second lockdown was announced in France in October 2020. Before the



trial, Chinese activists such as Cai requested and obtained authorization to demonstrate. To “better prepare this demonstration,” a WeChat group was created by Cai on March 22, 2021, which soon gathered about thirty people from different migratory generations and professions, who were all interested in the trial and involved in the organization of the demonstration. They were mainly newcomers but also included a few descendants of migrants. Their number also included Chinese journalists in France, leaders of various associations, lawyers, and film makers (one coauthor also attended as a researcher). On the evening of March 22, a meeting was held by Cai via Zoom to coordinate and organize the details of the event: making signs, creating slogans, determining who could go inside the courthouse, and livestreaming communication and reporting (Wang, 2022).

This example demonstrates a gradual transition from voluntary activity such as mutual assistance in the 1990s, to mobilization to combat insecurity and police violence from 2010 to 2019, and finally to mobilization beginning in 2020 that brings together the issues of discrimination and racist attacks targeting the Chinese community in France.

#### 4.3 *Toward an Appropriation of the Anti-racist Discourse in the Mobilization of Chinese Descendants*

Cai’s activism and the mobilization of young Chinese students described above also resonate with the activism of the descendants. Nevertheless, the mobilizations of descendants can take a very different form. The Association of Young Chinese in France (AJCF) is of particular interest. Created in 2009, the AJCF is a nonprofit association that, according to the description on its website, historically has set a goal of “offering a space for exchange and expression for young French citizens of Chinese origin.” Since the beginning of the pandemic, the AJCF has noticed the resurgence of anti-Asian racism and reacted by denouncing it and publicizing it. To do this, the AJCF opened an email account to collect testimony from Asians who have experienced episodes of racism. The testimony was publicized on social networks and presented at events organized to discuss anti-Asian racism in France. Laetitia, a PhD student in history and president of the association, and Daniel, a former president and current vice-president who is now retraining to be a consultant, describe the unprecedented and massive nature of this mobilization with regard to anti-Asian racism during the pandemic:

It is unprecedented, we have never seen such a large wave of messages. ... We’ve also seen that there are a lot of people, young people of Asian descent who ... maybe some have become aware of anti-Asian racism,

but I think others have ... already been aware for a long time ... but who decided at that particular point [during the pandemic] to take action to deconstruct this racism.

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The increase in awareness of racism and the reactions to it driven by Covid-19 are also reflected at the AJCF. During the interview, discussing the perspectives on anti-Asian racism, Daniel refers to the “history of Asian struggles” and reveals, for example, that the term “racism” was not always used:

The history of the struggle against anti-Asian racism has reached some major milestones. It is often linked to a tragic event. The first big milestone was ... the death of Zhang Chaolin in 2016. That’s when tens of thousands of people gathered to talk about anti-Asian racism, and that word was still ... very taboo, because we were talking about “safety for everybody.” Our claims talked about the “dignity [of the victim],” “insecurity [being banned],” etc. ... But we didn’t talk much about racism. It was afterward, when a decision of the French justice system was announced, in which the aggravating circumstance of racism, of racist targeting, was alleged, that we really started to say, with other associations: if the justice system says that there is anti-Asian racism, it is because it must exist, and it is a term that we can use, then, it is no longer taboo.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

Daniel describes the progressive appropriation of the term “racism” by the AJCF. According to him, this appropriation was linked to institutional legitimization by a legal decision at a trial in which racism was considered an aggravating circumstance in the case of an attack on a person of Chinese origin.<sup>4</sup> The use of the term “racism” by the AJCF reveals the evolution of its discourse and interests.

In the following pages, we examine the posts published by the AJCF on its Facebook page from its creation in 2010 until July 2021 as an example of the gradual emergence of the topic of anti-Chinese attacks and evolution in the way in which this topic is presented, along with the issue of racism. The AJCF is not the only organization that denounces attacks and anti-Asian racism. However, it is one of the biggest and oldest in France that attracts people of

4 This refers to the trial of three defendants who attacked women who were mostly of Asian origin between May and June 2019 in Paris and in a nearby suburb. The May 2020 court decision considers the racial aspect as an aggravating circumstance, due to the racist targeting.



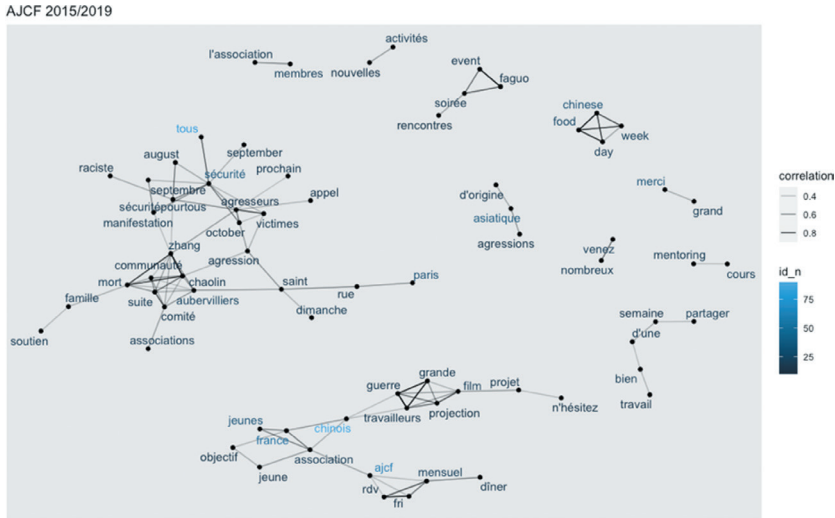


FIGURE 10.5 Tree graph of the relationship among the most frequently used terms in AJCF Facebook posts between 2015 and 2019

terms indicates a stronger correlation between the terms. The correlation measure is from 0 to 1, in which 0 means no correlation between two terms and 1 means complete correlation.

Between September 2010 and December 2014, the AJCF published 232 posts. Figure 10.4 shows that the posts are structured around two thematic poles. The first, at the very top, deals with recreational and cultural activities, particularly photography (“photos”) and cooking (“food week,” “Chinese cooking”). The second, and larger, thematic pole deals with associative activities, in particular, activities that aim to increase the association’s popularity, to attract members (“members,” “monthly dinner”), and to attract sympathizers (“sympathizers”).

In the second time window, from January 2015 to December 2019, the AJCF published 278 posts. As in the previous time window, Figure 10.5 shows that some of the themes deal with organizational and cultural activities. This is the case with the words at the bottom of the figure, which indicates a group of posts dealing with cultural activities, such as film screenings on the World War I (“screening,” “film,” “great,” “war”) and associated meetings (“dinner,” “monthly,” “meeting,” “association”).

The archipelago made up of a smaller and disconnected group of words on the righthand side of the figure also deals with cultural activities; one example is “Chinese” “food” “week” or “mentoring” “courses.” However, what draws our attention is the large word cloud on the lefthand side of the figure, which gathers posts that deal with the attacks on people of Chinese origin in Paris,

“racist” (13 times) also appears in this cloud; the term “racism” is notably correlated to the hashtag #sécuritépour tous, which we translate as #securityforeverybody.

We thus note that this word cloud is strongly marked by terms related to security and that the attacks are described in relation to common criminality. In this context, the terms “racism” and “racists” appear in a marginal way and have very little correlation with “security” (0.07).

Finally, we examine the last time window (see Figure 10.6), which covers the Covid-19 pandemic. We found that the AJCF published 189 posts, that is, less than in the previous time windows, but over a period of twenty months (instead of 52 and 60 months for the first and second time windows) and at a higher frequency than before: 9.5 posts per month between 2020 and July 2021, compared with 4.6 for the period between January 2015 and December 2019 and 4.5 in the period between September 2010 and December 2014.

We note the existence of several small groups of independent posts with cultural and event-related themes: in particular, we find the existence of a word cloud at the top left of the figure that deals with “events” and activities that bring together several “associations” (“associations” and the hashtag #toutlemondeensemble, which means “everyone united”). Similarly, we see a smaller cloud about Chinese New Year celebrations (“new year”) in January 2020 (“January”).

What is remarkable with regard to our study is a large word cloud that occupies the entire lower and middle portion of the figure 10.6. This group

AJCF 2020/2021

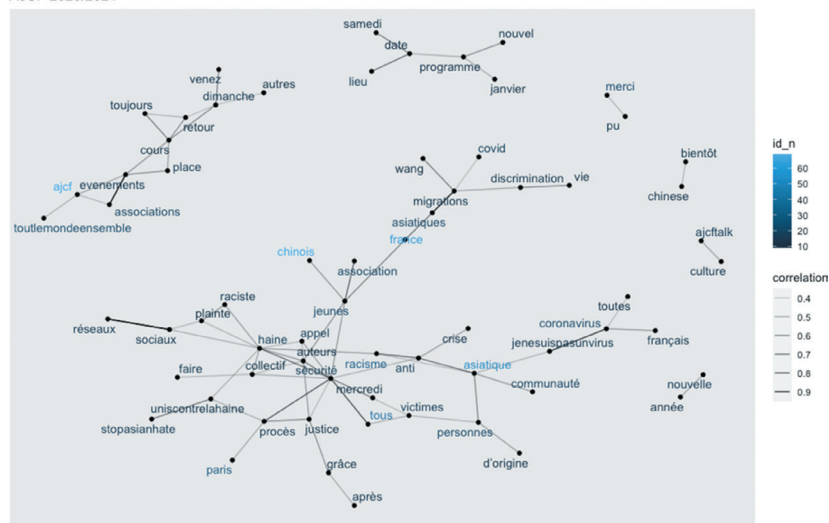


FIGURE 10.6 Tree graph of the relationship among the most frequently used terms in AJCF Facebook posts between 2020 and 2021

includes posts related to the upsurge in attacks on people of Asian origin from the beginning of the pandemic as well as different forms of reaction to these attacks. Along these lines, we note in particular the existence of two branches that extend to the extreme ends: in the first one, the term “covid” is in the center of the figure, and in the second one, the terms “French,” “all,” and “coronavirus” are at the bottom right. These two branches gather posts about the Covid-19 pandemic and converge toward the center of the cloud, which is made up of the terms “hate,” “security,” and “racism.”

The term “racism” has a dominating presence in this cloud. Indeed, the term “racism” is the ninth-most-used term over the period 2020–2021 after generic terms such as “Chinese,” “AJCF,” “France,” and so on (see Figure 10.6). More specifically, the term “racism” (in French) appears forty-seven times and the terms “racists” twenty-three times and “racism” (in English) six times and the hashtags “#stopracism” six times and “#racismeantiasiatique” five times. We emphasize that terms related to “racism” (“racism,” “racists,” etc.) appear much more often than in the previous time windows, 3.1 times more often than in the second window and 4.1 times more often than in the first window, and this over a period about one-third the size of previous windows.

The term “hate” is also strongly present in this cloud and appears nineteen times (compared with only three times in the previous window). Next to “hate,” we find word such as “hateful” and the hashtags #stopasianhate and #uniscontrelahaine (which means “united against hate”), which appear 22 and 13 times, respectively. All these words form a “register of hate” that is strongly correlated with the register of racism.

The word “security” also appears in this cloud: however, in the previous period, it appears fifty-eight times (alone or in the hashtag #sécuritépour tous) and thus is the dominant semantic register, whereas in this period, the hashtag #sécuritépour tous and the word “security” appear only twenty-one times. Beginning in 2020, the word “security” is strongly associated with words such as “hate” (0.47), “racism” (0.32), and “racist” (0.16): security is therefore presented in relation to racist attacks. The contrast with the period 2015–2019, when the term “security” mainly referred to physical attacks during the commission of common crimes, is noteworthy.

Thus when we compare the posts about attacks on people of Chinese origin in the second and third time windows, we see a considerable shift in discursive registers. In the word clouds about attacks on people of Asian origin, the security register, which dominated between 2015 and 2019, is surpassed by the registers of racism and hate.

Another important aspect is that in posts about attacks on people of Asian descent in the period 2020–2021, the word “discrimination” appears eighteen

times. However, this word was never used between 2010 and 2019. Since 2020, we see the emergence of the racism, hatred, and discrimination registers in addition to the security register. This is a major indicator of the shift in the AJCF's discourse about the attacks on people of Chinese and Asian origin. Also beginning in 2020, the registers of security, racism, hatred, and discrimination are very strongly correlated with one another: "racism" is very strongly correlated with "hate" (0.38) and "security" (0.32) as well as to "violence" (0.35) and "trial" (0.40). In contrast, between 2015 and 2019, "racism" was mostly correlated with words such as "against" (0.24), "young" (0.24), and "society" (0.22).

In other words, in posts about attacks on Asians, between 2015 and 2019, the security register is dominant, and the racism register appears occasionally and is uncorrelated with the security register: the security register alone is sufficient for talking about attacks on Asians. However, beginning in 2020, the posts about attacks on people of Asian origin are strongly marked by the registers of racism and hate, and they are strongly correlated with each other and with the security register. This means that the security mindset, which is less present than in the previous period, is now defined more in terms of hate and racist attacks. In other words, post-2020, attacks are more often and more easily defined as "racist" and "hateful." This becomes even more obvious from the correlation in these two periods between words "attack" and "attacks" and the registers of "racism" ("racism," "racist," etc.), and of hate ("hate," "hateful," etc.).

Between 2015 and 2019, the word "attack" is not correlated with any of the terms in the racism or hate register and the plural, "attacks," is very weakly correlated with "racism" (0.05) and "racist" (0.06). The situation changes dramatically in 2020: during the pandemic, the term "attack" is very strongly correlated with "racist" (0.32) and less strongly with "hate" (0.13). Similarly, the term "attacks" (plural) is strongly correlated with the hashtags #stopracism (0.38) and #racismeantiasiatique (0.23) as well as with the words "racism" (0.14), "racist" (0.11), and "hate" (0.10) and more widely and very strongly with the words "discriminating" (0.34), "stigmatization" (0.27), and "discrimination" (0.25).

The NLP data indicate that the types of reactions to racist attacks on Asians seem to change between the second and third time windows, in the light of Covid-19. In particular, we examine the relationship between words that indicate types of individual and collective reactions and the words "safety" and "racism" (we exclude the words "discrimination" and "hate," which did not appear, or appeared very little, before 2020).

Between 2015 and 2019, the word "security" is correlated with "mobilization" (0.15) and "protests" (0.40); the word "racism" is correlated with "struggle"

(0.44). The reactions to the attacks took the form of calls to action and protest. Beginning in 2020, we see a huge change: “racism” is correlated with “mobilization” (0.15) and “protests” (0.40), whereas “security” is correlated with terms such as “to report” (0.22), “complaint” (0.38), the site “report.gouv.fr” (0.27), “reporting” (0.35), “sos” (0.35), “lawyers” (0.15), “type of complaint” (0.34). Moreover, the response to attacks begins to evolve, as legal tools, especially reports and complaints, are added to the public protests. In particular, the complaints address the racist and hateful nature of the attacks: in fact, “complaint” is very strongly correlated with “racist” (0.46) and with “hate” (0.44). In addition to the increasing awareness of the racist nature of attacks, we also note awareness that the racist nature of attacks is relevant to the legal actions taken. The strong correlation between “security” and the site “signalement.gouv.fr” suggest that the reports and complaints concern not only physical attacks but also the attacks on digital platforms and social networks. The site “signalement.gouv.fr” enables victims to report verbal attacks received online. This shows that the digital space has turned into a place where racism can be expressed as well as where action can be taken in response to racism (Wang, 2022).

Finally, we conclude this section by examining the frequency with which the “racism” and “hatred” register was mobilized in the period 2020–2021. Figure 10.7 illustrates, at a weekly frequency, the recurrence of words in related to racism (“racism,” “racist,” “racists,” “#stopracism,” “#racismantiasitics”) and to hate (“hate,” “hateful,” “stopasianhate,” “uniscontrelahate”) between January 2020 and July 2021.

The registers of racism and hate were mobilized in three time windows that correspond well to the three waves of the pandemic in France. The first window covers weeks 4 to 18, corresponding to the period from the end of January to the beginning of May 2020, which is the period characterized by the racialization of Covid-19 and the increase in the number and visibility of

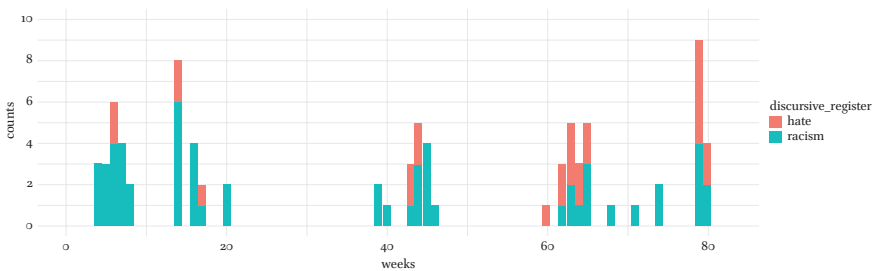


FIGURE 10.7 Recurrence of terms related to racism and to hate between January 2020 and July 2021 in the AJCF Facebook posts



racist attacks on people of Asian origin. The racism register was particularly strongly mobilized from weeks 4 to 8, when the pandemic began to spread globally and people of Asian origin were targeted as potential carriers of the virus.

The second time window is weeks 39 to 45, between the end of September and the first half of November 2020. In France, this period was characterized by the second wave of the pandemic and a rise in hostility toward and attacks on people of Asian origin. This period was notably marked by the explicit call for hate and attacks on Asians on Twitter by a group of people who considered Asians responsible for the pandemic (see *supra*). Groups mobilized to denounce racist remarks, and a lawsuit was quickly filed against those who launched this call.

Finally, the last period, weeks 62 to 80, from the beginning of March to the first half of July 2021, corresponds to a gradual rise in circulation of the virus, the tightening of control measures and, finally, the third lockdown in France, on April 5th–26th. This period also corresponds to when the people who published incitements on Twitter to attack people of Asian origin at the end of October 2020 were put on trial. This trial was followed closely by the AJCF and by anti-racist organizations in general (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021).

The register of hate gains frequency across the three time windows, and, in the last time window, is symmetrically paralleled by the register of racism. From the temporal perspective, the denunciation of racism seems to track circulation of the virus very strongly and seems to be increasingly structured and accompanied by the register of hate.

To conclude this section, four points should be emphasized. First, the way in which attacks on people of Asian origin are described has evolved considerably. The “security” register in 2015–2019 has been surpassed by the register of “racism” and “hate” and accompanied by the register of “discrimination.” Second, since 2020, attacks on people of Asian descent have been more clearly and frequently referred to as “racist,” “hateful,” and “discriminatory.” Third, these attacks were strongly linked to the Covid-19 pandemic and the racialization of the virus. In this regard, Covid-19 seems to have raised awareness of the existence of anti-Asian racism and led to a categorization of the attacks as racist and hateful. Finally, the types of reactions to attacks have also evolved: in addition to the calls for protests and demonstrations, since 2020 there have been calls to report and file complaints. This indicates the appropriation of legal tools and recourse to rights in the reaction to anti-Asian racism, pushing for social change. The AJCF is an example of a profound change in the Chinese population in France, in how it thinks about and combat anti-Asian racism in France.

#### 4.5 *From Fighting Anti-Asian Racism to General Anti-racist Struggles: Solidarity with Other Ethnic Minorities?*

It should be remembered that the AJCF's action is not representative of all the forms of mobilization and collective reaction by descendants. Daniel emphasizes this during the interview:

At that time, we saw that a lot of accounts were created on Instagram, well, on social networks in general but especially on Instagram; I think of Sororasie, Stop\_asiaphobia, Studiojaune. They grew very quickly and attracted thousands or even tens of thousands of followers.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

Daniel highlights the existence of other groups, which he associates with "anti-racist activism" and whose modes of action and political inspirations are, according to him, different from those of the AJCF. Camille, whom we did not interview as a representative of any particular movement but who nevertheless considers herself an activist in various groups, such as the PanAsiAFeminist Collective [*Collectif PanAsiAFéministe*, or PAAF] or others that are not concerned only with Asians, such as "Decolonizing the Arts" [*Décoloniser les arts*], positions herself in opposition to the AJCF:

Well, it is an association that I did not want to join precisely because of its position on security. It is very security minded and promotes culture, but does not question racism at all. That turned me off. ... it has an anti-racist position but a very bland one, a bit of *sos Racisme* (NGO), a bit of the *Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme* [LICRA; International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism], and for me it's not entirely anti-racist in fact, and, above all, it's a very security-based attitude, and that scares me a lot. This is not to criticize the AJCF as it does good things as well.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Her speech demonstrates a number of political judgments of the AJCF and its conception of racism and anti-racist struggle, which she describes as "tepid" and the reason for her rejection. This position clearly highlights the political dissension among Chinese people who are committed and mobilized in the fight against racism. Camille's organizational commitment reflects anti-racist convictions that go beyond Chinese and Asian people but also fighting for the rights of other groups, including Blacks and North Africans. In this respect, Camille is not the only respondent who expresses concern about racism that

is not limited to Chinese or Asians. For example, when Denis talks about his activism at the time of Liu Shaoyao's death, he also mentions his mobilization for non-Chinese victims of police violence, such as Théodore Luhaka or Adama Traoré, and claims to have always tried to be present at all these demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> However, the connection of the anti-racist struggle between Chinese and other ethnic groups and the willingness to form solidarity with different minority groups are not shared by all respondents. Indeed, some respondents even pointed to the lack of support by Chinese people for the anti-racist struggles of other ethnic groups.

## 5 Conclusion

By using quantitative and qualitative data, our study analyzes the different attitudes among people of Chinese origin toward the attacks on them at a turning point in the history of anti-Asian racism, marked by the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, we examine how these attacks are experienced and reported across different groups within the Chinese population in France, with a time-based approach.

The quantitative data shows that 30 percent of our respondents report having experienced episodes of racism and discrimination since January 2020 and that 60 percent report that acts of racism against Asians have increased since March 2020. Moreover, descendants are more likely than migrants to report experiencing racism. Across all our groups of interviewees, the individual's age has a strong effect. Indeed, among both descendants and migrants, as age increases, the tendency to report experiencing racism decreases. We highlight that these differences reveal differentiated levels of familiarity with the experience of racism in general and anti-Asian racism in particular, and this is also true of how racism is thought about and described.

We also explore how respondents voice the experiences of anti-Asian racism they personally suffered or witnessed. The qualitative survey enables us to distinguish the various attitudes adopted by the respondents in the face of anti-Asian racism. First, the attitude of people who are "in denial about racism": they explain racist acts as a result of "fear of the virus," rather than as "fear of the Other." Some respondents deny the possibility of being victims of racism by emphasizing their personal achievements or their privileged social

5 On February 2, 2017, Théodore Luhaka, at the age of 22, was seriously injured at a police checkpoint in Aulnay-sous-Bois (Seine-Saint-Denis). On July 19, 2016, Adama Traoré, age 24, died after his arrest by police in Beaumont-sur-Oise.

position in the living society, while others try to justify racist acts against people of Chinese origin in France as being the “fault” of the Chinese government. This attitude is mainly common among educated and middle-aged migrants.

Second, some respondents describe and denounce anti-Asian racism during Covid-19. Compared to Chinese migrants, the descendants show greater familiarity with the concept of racism. For the former, the pandemic has revealed anti-Asian racism, whereas for many descendants, the racism experienced during the pandemic is only one manifestation of longstanding racism in French society. These heterogeneous explanations reveal different degrees of awareness of the phenomenon of racism and different relationships to “race.” They are structured into different narratives, from descriptions of personal experiences to the explanation of these personal experiences in terms of the evolution of French society and the use of scientific concepts and political rhetoric.

Finally, multiple types of reactions and battles (or not) against racism emerge from these differences in how racism is conceptualized. The reactions range from strategies of distancing and avoidance to immediate and personal reaction to political engagement. Among the migrants, the pandemic has led to the emergence, in an unprecedented way, of collective mobilization against anti-Asian racism in France. Among the descendants, who are already more familiar with the phenomenon of racism, we observe an orientation toward the appropriation of anti-racist discourse in their mobilization (Wang et al., 2022).

Generally speaking, we stress the role of the pandemic in the increased awareness and fight against racism among the Chinese population in France. In a context characterized by an increase in media coverage of anti-Asian racism, Chinese migrants are experiencing a turning point in their ways of perceiving, thinking about, and fighting anti-Asian racism, and several new anti-racist collectives and actors are emerging. However, descendants are reconsidering racist experiences in the past in the light of awareness due to the health crisis. The role of the pandemic in raising awareness of the existence of anti-Asian racism is mirrored in the evolution of the interests and discourses of the AJCF from 2010 to 2021. At least since 2015, the AJCF has begun to denounce the attacks on people of Chinese origin in France. From 2015 to 2019, the attacks were portrayed with the security register, in particular as being associated with common crime. But after 2020, in parallel with the pandemic period, the attacks are more frequently described through registers of racism, hate and discrimination. The example of the AJCF, with its specificities, reveals a deep change in the population of Chinese origin in France, in how it thinks and speaks about anti-Asian racism.

Our study also raises the more general question of the anti-racist struggle and the (im)possibility of a collaboration between people of Chinese origin

and other ethnic minorities, including non-Chinese Asians. Indeed, this vision of racism alongside black and other brown people is not shared by all interviewees. In line with other empirical studies carried out in France, we recognize the lack of Chinese support – notably from first-generation migrants – for the anti-racist struggles of other ethnic groups (Wang, 2022). These research questions on inter-ethnic relations in the common struggle against racism, and on the social conditions for “pan-Asian” solidarity (Wang et al., 2023), would benefit from other in-depth studies in the future.

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# Caring for Compatriots during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Professional Practices by Health-Care Workers of Chinese Origin in France

*Simeng Wang*

## Abstract

This chapter reflects on supporting the health of migrants in the French context, in order to move from an approach focused on “cure” to one prioritizing “care.” In studying the professional practices of Chinese health workers in France during Covid-19, author distinguishes two types of treatment available. The first is what is observed in the French health-care system. Thanks to the medical professionals of Chinese origin who work as hospital practitioners, office-based physicians and therapists, more medical care has been adapted to the needs of the population of Chinese origin. The responses by these medical professionals during an unprecedented health-care crisis revealed the limits of the French health-care system, which does not sufficiently take into account the specific needs of foreign patients, particularly those who are vulnerable based on their language, culture, and socioeconomic status. Second, author examines the Chinese ethnic care networks, which developed on the margins of the French health-care system. For example, e-health monitoring (in Western medicine or Chinese medicine) in Chinese on WeChat was created by the Chinese health professionals living in France and Chinese-language webinars were held with the goal of spreading knowledge about Covid-19 among Chinese overseas. The two kinds of treatment were complementary for keeping migrants healthy during Covid-19. At this unprecedented moment in a health crisis, the response to Covid-19 opened up the possibilities for co-constructing intersectoral systems of action (particularly between medical professionals and social welfare actors) and of collaborating between the clinical Western medicine approach and the complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) approach, with regard to creating more equal access to health care, while questioning the long-term feasibility of these changes.

## Keywords

migrants' health – care – Covid-19 pandemic – Chinese overseas – Chinese ethnic networks – e-health monitoring – WeChat – complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) – Western medicine – Chinese medicine – health-care workers – professional practices – French health-care system – foreign patients – vulnerable patients – transnational knowledge circulation – social welfare – health inequality

## 1 Introduction

Many academic publications in the social sciences as well as in medicine, public health, and epidemiology indicate the exacerbation of social inequality in health care in different countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. In any given society, social inequality in health care among ethnic and racial minorities varies considerably (Abedi et al., 2021; Chowkwanyun & Reed, 2020), because of differences in socioeconomic status, living conditions, and access to health care (Esenwa et al., 2021; Lopez et al., 2021). Peres et al. (2021), for example, note that in Brazil, patients who identified as White (36%) and Asian (34%) had more access to intensive care treatment than patients who identified as Black and Brown (32%) or indigenous (28%). Based on this finding, they argue for more preventive health-care measures aimed at people in ethnic and racial minority groups that are the most vulnerable, in order to address their lower access to testing and treatment for Covid-19, both of which are linked to their lower economic status. In the US, African-Americans have the highest levels of morbidity and mortality linked to Covid-19 (Yancy, 2020). Frydman et al. (2020) and others emphasize that, in addition to genetic or pre-existing conditions, some socioeconomic factors, such as access to health care, food, and lifestyle choices influence coagulation, particularly for the prothrombotic phenotype (of African-Americans) in the treatment of and testing for Covid-19. African-Americans are also likely to have less access to prescriptions for anticoagulants than people who identify as White and are also less likely to have therapeutic treatment.<sup>1</sup> In Sweden, statistics on Covid-19 mortality and morbidity in both the first and the second waves of the pandemic show that foreign-born individuals have affected much more than people born in Swedish (Bredström & Mulinari, 2022). Inequality in health care was exacerbated during the pandemic, sparking a public health crisis, which reflects the history

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1 For more discussion on ethnic and racial disparities in Covid-19 morbidity and mortality, see the summary of relevant literature in French and English in Wang (2021).

of racism and discrimination pervading society and reveals systemic racism in health care more deeply (Blumenthal et al., 2020).

In France, the national survey “Epidemiology and Living Conditions” (Epi-Cov) carried out among economically active French people between eighteen and sixty-four years old, shows the “cumulative effects of social inequality” (Bajos et al., 2020, 8), which affects immigrants and descendants of immigrants, particularly those of non-European origin who often have the most underprivileged social background. Social inequality in health care is especially exacerbated in areas that are considered disadvantaged, such as the Seine-Saint Denis area (Mariette & Pitti, 2020a, 2020b).

In the context of a general shortage of medical resources, non-French speaking immigrant populations are affected by systemic discrimination in health care even more during a pandemic (Azria et al., 2020). This is due to language barriers and a lack of understanding of the French health-care system, as well as their rights in general. The population of Chinese origin in France, a majority of which comprises non-French speaking immigrants, has not been spared the ramifications of inequality in health care, which worsened during the pandemic: a lack of access to treatment and a delay in receiving care, among others. The third and fourth cases of Covid-19 in France in January 2020 were those of an elderly Chinese man and his daughter, both tourists in France. The first died a few days after being hospitalized in Paris, almost ten days after his symptoms first appeared. During these first ten days, no hospital there agreed to admit him (MigraChiCovid, 2022).

From the point of view of the French health-care system and the healthcare professionals who work in it, one might ask: how should a person of migrant background who become vulnerable because of Covid-19 be cared for? And from a migrant patient's point of view, one might also ask the following questions: how does the people concerned cope with the situation? And does he or she mobilize other resources outside the French health-care system? In this respect, shifting from an approach based on a “cure” to one based on “care” is essential. In France, as defined by Pascale Molinier (2010), the notion of “care work” refers to specialized activities that explicitly focus on concern for others. Care consists of proposing actions and ways of doing things that are adapted to the needs of the recipient. Concern for others is all the more a part of Chinese medicine, which requires a care relationship centered on the person who is suffering and listening to the patient. In France, the importance of listening and the relationship and empathy between caregiver and patient is often among the reasons that patients turn to Chinese medicine (Wang, 2022b). Faced with the exclusion of Chinese and Chinese-speaking patients from the French health-care system, health-care professionals of Chinese origin and other resource persons within ethnic networks are mobilizing to find solutions.

This chapter focus on health-care providers of Chinese origin, who work in the French health-care system or on the periphery of it, and who, in one way or another, are involved in one way or another in the care of Chinese patients during a pandemic—knowing that their patients might come from outside Chinese ethnic networks. On the one hand, new medical and paramedical practices have emerged thanks to these medical professionals of Chinese origin who—despite not being especially numerous—work in the national health-care system. Because they hold the title of “doctor,” these medical professionals of Chinese origin are particularly well placed to handle this change in the health-care system during this public health crisis; we return to this later. On the other hand, thanks to the particular characteristics of the Chinese diaspora population in France and health practitioners working on the margins of the French health-care system, some at-home health-care practices observed in Chinese networks rapidly developed outside the French health-care system during the pandemic. These characteristics include population concentrations in certain urban and suburban areas, the abundance and availability of ethnic and community resources for the treatment and prevention of Covid-19 during the pandemic (see Chapters 2 and 5), and accessible physical and digital resources.

This chapter is based on the observation of these two coexisting social realities: on the one hand, vulnerable Chinese migrants suffering the consequences of social inequalities in French health-care system, and on the other, these same people access care thanks to community resources. There is a paradox between the fact that they are more or less neglected by the French health-care system and the fact that they are finally equipped with care resources throughout the pandemic. This chapter aims to analyze this paradox and how it was built and how it was made possible, by examining the interventions of caregivers of Chinese origin within the French health-care system or on its margins: the creation of a new Chinese-language emergency phone line, launching alerts about pandemic conditions for French colleagues, sharing and translating scientific information in different languages, offering care using Chinese medicine, and so on.

## 2 Health Care for Chinese People in France: Heterogeneity and Inequality Exacerbated by Covid-19

The majority of the Chinese population residing in France lives in Île-de-France. They form an extremely heterogeneous group in terms of social class, gender, ethnic origin, geographic origin, and migratory generation (Wang, 2017). This diversity is reflected in geographic access to medical services (conditioned

above all by place of residence), in relationships with French health professionals (*Médecins du Monde*, 2009; Wang, 2013), in the distance from Western clinical medicine (Rovillé-Sausse & Prado Martinez, 2009), and in Chinese medicine practiced in China and in the diaspora (Wang, 2019a). Indeed, the social support networks for Chinese patients, the nuclear and extended family configurations as well as the level of education, the proficiency in French, and more globally the social backgrounds of Chinese patients are the most salient factors that influence their health-care practices—developed at the local, national, and transnational scale—in normal times as well as during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize the fragmentation of the population of Chinese origin in France in terms of knowledge of the French health-care system. Using statistics collected through the online MigraChiCovid questionnaire (see Figure 11.1, as estimated with a multinomial logistic regression and presented as a ratio of exponential odds), we found that, among the respondents, those who were born outside France and are now naturalized citizens were more likely to say that they have gained general knowledge of the French health-care system since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic than descendants

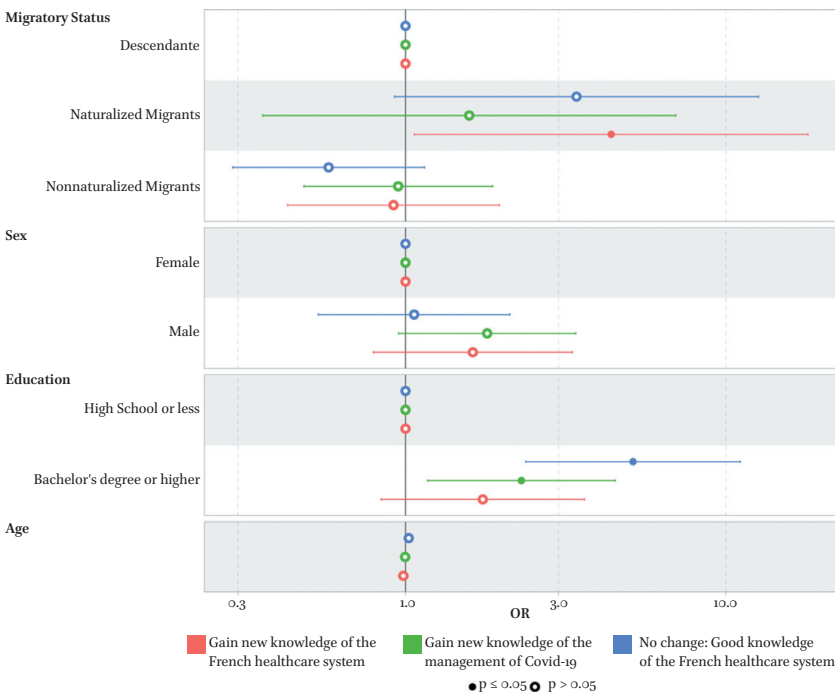


FIGURE 11.1 Knowledge of the French health-care system and the evolution in Covid-19-related knowledge among Chinese people in France

of migrants born in France (probability = 4.39, 95% CI = 1.07, 18.1,  $p$ -value = 0.040) or that they already have good knowledge of the French health-care system (probability = 3.41, 95% CI = 0.92, 12.6,  $p$  = 0.066) than to say that they are not well informed about the French health-care system, and the pandemic did not change this. Migrants who are not naturalized, however, were less likely than descendants born in France to indicate that their knowledge of the French health-care system was good before the Covid-19 pandemic and remained so. They also indicated that they have little knowledge about the French health-care system, with no change during the pandemic (however, these differences do not appear to be statistically significant [probability = 0.58, 95% CI = 0.29, 1.15,  $p$  = 0.12]). Regardless of migratory status, the most educated group of respondents (bachelor's degree or higher) were more likely than the least educated group (high school diploma or below) to say that their knowledge of the French health-care system was more or less the same before and after Covid-19 and that they already understand the system relatively well (probability = 5.13, 95% CI = 2.37, 11.01,  $p$  = 0.001) or that they had gained new knowledge about the management of Covid-19 (probability = 2.30, 95% CI = 1.17, 4.52,  $p$  = 0.016).

In the following pages, we first examine the treatment offered to patients of Chinese origin by medical personnel from the same migratory background who work in the French health-care system, including hospital workers, doctors, and non-hospital-based medical professionals. We look at their engagement with the reorganization of the French health-care system, which aims to reduce social inequality in health care. We analyze the diverse professional practices of these medical professionals of Chinese origin: the creation of a Chinese-language emergency services hotline, the launch (with French colleagues) of a pandemic alert system, and the sharing and translation of scientific information in different languages, among others. We highlight the dual roles as facilitator and mediator played by medical professionals of Chinese origin working in the French health-care system. These health-care professionals facilitated the transnational circulation of knowledge and medical information related to Covid-19, while also supporting access to health care for patients of Chinese origin, particularly those whose economic conditions are unstable or who do not speak French.

Then, we study the health-care practices developed by medical professionals of Chinese origin who work on the margins of the French health-care system: practitioners of Chinese medicine and paramedical personnel, among others. They are trained in Western or Chinese medicine, but their credentials are not recognized in France, and they often received their degrees before immigrating to France. These medical practices take the form of care and prevention methods organized within Chinese ethnic networks, both physical and virtual. Examples include the creation of Chinese-language telehealth systems

(using both Western and Chinese medicine) with WeChat and the distribution of Covid-19 kits from China to Chinese students studying in France, among others.<sup>2</sup>

### 3 Working toward Better Treatment for Chinese Patients: Actions of Doctors of Chinese Origin in France

The actions that health-care professionals of Chinese origin have taken to mitigate the effects of systemic discrimination and the lack of support for Chinese migrants inevitably occur within the pandemic-related reorganization of the French health-care system and are influenced by renewed professional concern due to Covid-19. They include the high-level government decision to create new systems for treating patients and sharing expertise (Bergeron et al., 2020), the coordination of medical activity between health-care institutions and medical and social organizations (CNS, 2021), and the structure of local primary care (Hassenteufel et al., 2020) amid a larger regionalization of health care. It also includes patient triage practices and the hierarchization of clinical, social, and interpersonal activity (Gaudillière et al., 2021), as well as access to available information at a time of medical uncertainty (Bloy, 2008; Castel, 2008) for doctors, their sociability within professional networks (Castel, 2005), the use of new technology and telemedicine (Manus, 2021), the postponement of nonurgent surgery, and suspension of paramedical treatment, among others.

#### 3.1 *The Creation of a New Chinese-Language Emergency Services Hotline*

In March 2020, during the first lockdown in France, a Chinese-language hotline was put in place for French emergency services, called the SAMU. The line is active between 8 am and 6 pm, and the call center team consists of twelve people of Chinese origin, including two psychologists. All the call center agents have medical training, which they obtained in France or China. Before the hotline opened, there was also a twenty-four-hour training course in emergency medicine. The initiator of this hotline is Dr. Na, an emergency room doctor. She arrived in France in 2009 through an exchange program between Wuhan University and Pierre and Marie Curie University, earned an undergraduate degree in emergency medicine, followed by master's degree in

<sup>2</sup> This refers to a mobile app for text and voice messaging developed by the Chinese company Tencent. For information on the use of WeChat among the Chinese diaspora worldwide, see Sun and Yu (2022).

integrative biology and physiology (specializing in clinical and experimental pharmacology) in 2013. That year, she passed the exam for a French medical license, enabling her to practice medicine in France.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2013, she has worked in the emergency room at Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital. As soon as she began working there, she proposed the creation of a consultation system specifically for patients of Chinese origin. The consultation system was created in 2015; one afternoon a week, she sees patients for general medicine consultations. According to her, the patients are diverse in terms of profession and immigration status, comprising students, businesspeople, salaried employees, tourists, and undocumented migrants. They all lack familiarity with the French health-care system, largely because they lack proficiency in the French language. Their reasons for seeking medical care vary widely and include chronic illness, cancer, and vaccinations. For Dr. Na, the fact that she had spearheaded this consultation system for Chinese patients (proposed in 2013 and created in 2015) greatly facilitated the establishment of a Chinese-language emergency services hotline because doing so enabled her to obtain a good understanding of the organizational steps required to set up this type of service. She also already knew the administrative procedures and the people in charge of this type of health-care service, which involves not only medical but also social organizations.

After it was created, word of this hotline spread within the Chinese population in France via ethnic networks that link different subgroups of the population: the Chinese embassy in France, Chinese media outlets based in France, and Chinese university associations, among others. According to Dr. Na, the hotline experienced its first peak in calls at the end March/beginning of April 2020: ten to twenty calls a day. That number fell at the beginning of May, and it received almost no calls until mid-May 2020. During the summer of 2020, the situation was relatively calm, and Dr. Na was the only person who continued to work the hotline. The number of calls rose again in October 2020, when the second wave of the pandemic began in France. In comparing these two peaks, she says:

Compared to the first wave [of the Covid-19 pandemic], this time [October 2020], the people [Chinese patients calling the hotline] seemed much more collected, and were calm: “I tested positive [for Covid-19], what should I do now?” Whereas during the first wave, it was [a time of] complete panic for patients. There was a lot of controversy between doctors

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3 She was licensed to practice medicine in China in 2009.



over what the best treatments were, so, patients were very worried, and we felt their stress immediately. This time, in October, people knew that 85 percent of diagnosed cases would be mild.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Fluctuations in the use of this emergency services hotline by people of Chinese origin mirrored the Covid-19 conditions in France, notably when hospitals were at capacity, and the French health-care system was overwhelmed. The creation of this hotline, coupled with offering adapted methods of care for immigrant patients—particularly of Chinese origin—during the first period of the pandemic reduced social inequality in health care and facilitated access to care for migrants. At the same time, this response by Dr. Na also shed light on the limits of the French system, especially the lack of translation services available to patients in health-care contexts. However, translation services are routinely offered to migrants from English-speaking countries, such as Canada and the United States.

### 3.2 *Non-hospital-based Care on the Frontlines*

Like Dr. Na, Dr. Lei is a doctor of Chinese origin who received her medical degree in France. After arriving in France in 2000 during her first year of medical school in China, Dr. Lei quickly realized that medical degrees from China were not recognized in France, and, so, she abandoned her studies in China and start again in France. After spending two years studying French, she passed the entrance exams for medical school and enrolled at Paris Descartes University in 2004, repeating one year of studies. She graduated in 2017 with a degree in general medicine and began to work at a clinic in Bussy St-Georges in 2019.

After two years there, Dr. Lei was the primary-care doctor at the practice for 1,900 patients, who, she said, reflected the demographic makeup of the community: 30% were Asian, including 20% of Chinese origin. In our interview, she described with pride and conviction her job, her specialization, and the organization of the health-care system in France:

I like the contact with patients—listening to them and having a friendly conversation. In France, clinic-based care is a parallel method to treatment at a hospital. I think that [the French] developed this pathway relatively early. ... They organized treatment in cities, in general medicine, and through family doctors, which really helps the public system. ... If I can help China one day, if I go back to China, I would like to participate in the development of this system of treatment in cities.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Dr. Lei was the first doctor in her clinic—which houses several other independent doctors, who specialize in gynecology and pediatrics, among others—to be aware of the severity of the situation and to wear a mask during consultations in order to protect herself. Despite her colleagues' doubts at the beginning of the pandemic about the need to protect themselves, she continuously warned them of the danger (see Chapter 2). Dr. Lei was also an early promoter of telehealth:

We can do video consultations to avoid having an outbreak on the premises. And this is what we did, and I strongly encouraged my colleagues to do this as well, so that we could try and keep the clinic as unaffected as possible. After the first lockdown [March 2020], there were many fewer visits, and fewer patients, but behind the scenes [online] it was nonstop. ... For me, telehealth consultations were new, and before this, I wasn't at all interested in telehealth—I preferred face-to-face appointments. But when the pandemic started, I found that we didn't really have a choice, and it was also a measure to protect others, the most vulnerable. ... I treated patients who were diagnosed [with Covid-19] or who had suspected cases. We had protocols—the health insurance system and the Department of Health sent us protocols.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

In fact, the third stage of the planned pandemic response strategy, which was officially reached in March 2020 (see *Ministère de la santé*, 2020) explicitly predicted that non-hospital-based doctors would find themselves “on the frontlines in ensuring treatment for patients who do not require hospitalization.” This shed light on the unique position of clinics and independent medical professionals during a particularly destabilizing pandemic, caught between the official stance of public authorities—which was to avoid sending Covid-19 patients to hospitals if possible—and the needs of the population, particularly if they required care that surpassed what clinics could offer.

As a non-hospital-based doctor, Dr. Lei actively participated in the reorganization of daily work at her medical practice during the urgent public health conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This included managing patient flows, the use of telehealth appointments (Iengar et al., 2020), and adapting treatments. She also collaborated with an anti-Covid center in a suburb of Paris and helped handle the delivery of 1,700 pieces of PPE sent from China, donated by three Chinese churches in Paris (see Chapter 12).

In this section, based on our interviews with Dr. Na and Dr. Lei, we analyze the actions of medical professionals of Chinese origin to reduce inequality in

health care that were exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis and affected Chinese and other patients. These two cases are complementary: one doctor works in a hospital and the other in a clinic that serves the public. In both cases, these doctors, originally from outside France, contributed to improve the French health-care system and played dual roles by facilitating access to care for patients and acting as intermediaries for information and treatment related to Covid-19 for their colleagues. For both Dr. Na and Dr. Lei, we note the narrowing relationship between the medical and social sectors, as seen in how they work with emergency services and collaborate with an anti-Covid-19 center. They performed “medical-social” tasks beyond what is strictly medical or clinical. This is echoed in research by other colleagues on French doctors during the pandemic. The Chinese-language emergency call line launched by Dr. Na helped to reduce the communication problems and lack of knowledge of the French health-care system. As shown by a qualitative study carried out among ethnic Chinese in the Netherlands, they underuse mental health services (Liu et al., 2015). The study states that the main obstacles identified concern practical issues, such as communication problems and a lack of knowledge of the health system. The Chinese interviewees also reported concerns about actual or anticipated discrimination in access to care. Measures suggested in the study for improving care include increased use of interpreters and cultural mediators, encouraging migrants to increase their language proficiency, and better dissemination of information about the health-care system. In the next section, we examine the health-care practices developed by medical professionals of Chinese origin who work on the margins of the French health-care system.

#### 4 Mobilizing Diaspora Resources and Caring for Compatriots on the Margins of the French Health-Care System

Different medical treatments and preventive practices for fighting Covid-19 have developed in Chinese ethnic networks. These practices were put in place by actors from diverse backgrounds: practitioners of Chinese medicine who are not recognized as doctors in France, businesspeople, volunteers at Franco-Chinese organizations, representatives from the Chinese embassy in France, and ordinary citizens, and others. Despite the fact that they are often invisible to those outside these networks, health-care resources that exist outside the French health-care system—or, in other words, within Chinese ethnic networks and include mutual aid, transnational care systems, and traditional Chinese medicine—have always existed (Wang, 2019a, 2022a). During the pandemic, however, because of both the scale and the urgent nature of Covid-19, these ethnic resources became more visible.

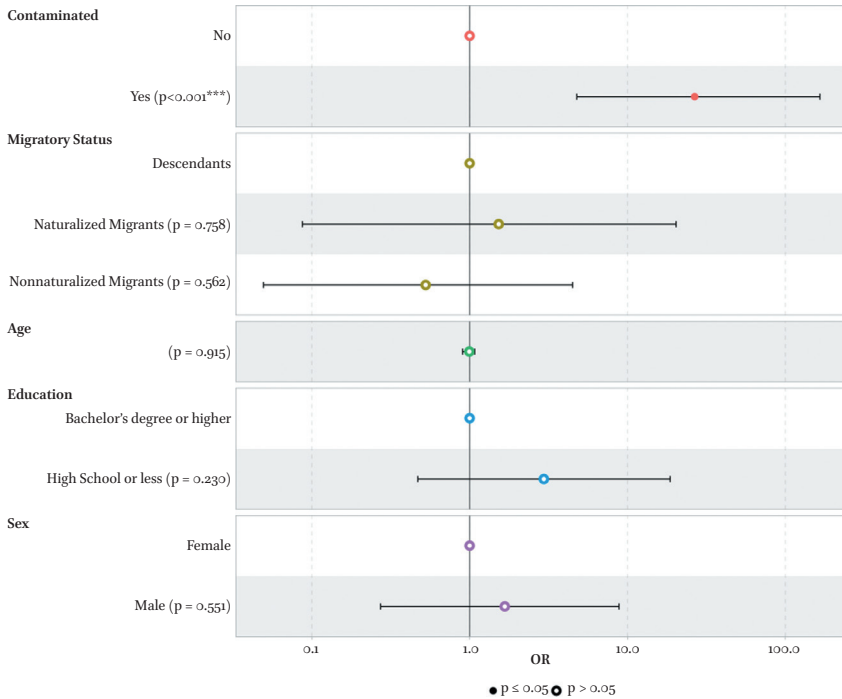


FIGURE 11.2 Tendency among Chinese people in France to seek treatment with Chinese medicine

#### 4.1 Medical Pluralism in the Treatment of Covid-19

Among the 387 respondents to the MigraChiCovid questionnaire, thirteen people—nine women and four men—claimed to have been infected by Covid-19. Figure 11.2 shows the results of a logistic regression examining how the fact of Covid-19 infection affected the probability of seeking telehealth appointments or in-person appointments in “alternative” medicine, namely Chinese medicine, by the respondents to the online questionnaire. This model considers only a subset ( $n = 261$ ) of the original sample composed of respondents who stated that they had been infected ( $n = 13$ ) or had not been infected ( $n = 248$ ), excluding respondents who said that they did not know whether they had been infected ( $n = 118$ ) or did not wish to answer the question ( $n = 8$ ). After we controlled for migration status, age, education, and sex, the respondents who had been infected with Covid-19 were much more likely to seek telehealth appointments or in-person appointments in Chinese medicine [OR = 26.6, 95% CI = 4.78, 166,  $p = < 0.001$ ].

Our qualitative findings support these statistics. The interviews carried out with five infected patients of Chinese origin and one close family member of an infected person (in all, four women and two men; four migrants and two

descendants born in France; see Appendix Table 11.1, which summarizes the treatment plans for these six patients) enable us to recreate their treatment plans. One patient (patient 1) was treated only with Chinese medicine. Three patients (2, 4, and 5) were treated only with Western medicine; close family members of patients 2 and 4 (spouses, children, or parents) consumed Chinese medicinal herbs aimed at prevention. Finally, two patients (3 and 6) were treated with a combination of methods. In other words, they started out with Western medicine and then moved more toward Chinese medicine or vice versa, depending on whether their health deteriorated or believed that whichever treatment they had started was ineffective. In this respect, most of these patients of Chinese origin alternated between two medical approaches—Chinese medicine and Western medicine—and their treatment plans were strongly influenced by medical pluralism (Wang, 2022b).

The combined approach was highlighted in the pandemic context by the urgent nature of Covid-19 and the lack of research, clinical trials, and treatments available at the beginning of the public health crisis. Some patients therefore felt moved to try alternative medicine even though they were hesitant to do so in before the pandemic. A cousin of one patient said in our interview:

My cousin [who had a PhD in biology from University of Paris 13] does not believe much in Chinese medicine—for him, it's not very scientific, but I pushed him to take some [Chinese medicine], saying, "In any case, right now you have nothing else to take for this illness, so you might as well try it—it won't kill you." I also told him that Ms. Cai [practitioner of Chinese medicine] is very competent. In the end, after he had taken Chinese medicine for two days, his energy came back quickly, and his sense of taste and smell returned as well, so he kept taking it and said, "Ah, it's magical, it's really good."

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

Ms. Cai, mentioned in this interview, is not officially recognized as a doctor but practices at a Chinese medicine clinic in Rueil-Malmaison, a suburb west of Paris. Originally from the Wenzhou region, she went to France in 1988 at age twelve and is now forty-five years old. She is descended from four generations of Chinese medicine practitioners in China and grew up surrounded by the culture of Chinese medicine. After studying first to become an accountant and then a nutritionist, she began to pursue it professionally. After she finished a training program in Chinese medicine and received a degree in international acupuncture recognized by the French government, she opened her

own Chinese medicine practice in 2018.<sup>4</sup> In addition to her work in health, she is now a businesswoman and owns and manages a small Chinese supermarket, as well as advocating for Chinese culture as a defender of rights against racism and discrimination against people of Chinese origin (see Chapter 10).

In February 2020, Ms. Cai created four WeChat groups in which she provided telehealth advice and care. This consisted largely of giving advice based on users' state of health, particularly those with suspected infections with Covid-19 and diagnosing and following up with patients. The majority of the latter were of Chinese origin, with a few French and Italian people as well. At the time of our interview (October 2020), Ms. Cai was also contributing to nine other WeChat groups, in which she gave information sessions on Chinese medicine, mostly in Chinese, to spread information about self-diagnosing Covid-19, so as to be prepared. In addition to offering treatment, Ms. Cai was also involved in the supply and transnational exchange of masks (see Chapter 12).

Ms. Cai estimates that she treated more than a hundred Covid-19 patients between February and October 2020. In March 2020, she started to write a book about her experience in treating Covid-19 with Chinese medicine. The French edition of this book, *Vaincre le Covid-19 et autres virus par la médecine traditionnelle chinoise* [*Overcoming Covid-19 and Other Viruses with Traditional Chinese Medicine*] was published in July 2020.<sup>5</sup> The book was also translated into Spanish. The treatments that Ms. Cai offers work in conjunction with treatment using Western medicine. She works with, among others, a primary-care physician originally from Vietnam who practices in Amiens and who attended a training program in Chinese medicine.

This general practitioner and I transfer patients between us, and we try and direct them toward biomedicine or Chinese medicine. As I don't have the right to prescribe [medicine], I send him some patients who need medication.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic, more than any other modern historical event, has changed the way in which treatment is offered—namely, via the internet (Pierce et al., 2021). In addition to consultations via WeChat in Western

4 She is a member of the National Federation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (FNMTc).

5 For more information on the book, see <https://livre.fnac.com/a14946216/Angelina-Jingrui-Cai-Vaincre-le-Covid-19-et-autres-virus-par-la-medecine-traditionnelle-chinoise/>.

medicine or Chinese medicine, another way in which the platform is mobilizing treatment resources within the Chinese network is in making medical and related information on the Covid-19 virus and disease more accessible, through webinars and other events. They are organized by different actors, including Chinese media, organizations, and the Chinese embassy, in collaboration with health-care experts from researchers to medical personnel, and aimed at the general population of overseas Chinese.

#### 4.2 *Making Medical and Paramedical Information about the Covid-19 Virus and Disease Accessible*

On April 4, 2020, during the first national lockdown in France, Renmin Net (owned by the *People's Daily*, the newspaper of the CCP) and the Chinese embassy to France co-organized a virtual conference hosted by Dr. Zhang Wenhong, an infectious disease specialist and professor at Fudan University in France. The conference was aimed at Chinese people in France, specifically students. During the conference, the audience posed many questions for Dr. Zhang: How did he think Covid-19 conditions will evolve in France? What exchanges of scientific information on Covid-19 have taken place between China and France, and what are possible future collaborations between the two countries in fighting the pandemic? How can people protect themselves in daily life? During this conference, Lu Shaye, the Chinese ambassador to France, Ren Limin, the spokesperson of the Union of Chinese Researchers and Students, Xu Kui, the president of the Franco-Chinese Overseas Chinese Association, the president of the Franco–Southern Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and several representatives of Chinese students in France attended online.

Later, on November 8, 2020, during the second lockdown in France, Oushidai Media, which is part of the Chinese media group *Ouzhou Shibao* (News from Europe),<sup>6</sup> and the Franco-Chinese Medical Association organized a webinar with three doctors,<sup>7</sup> two of which are of Chinese origin, on the theme “Preventing and Containing Covid-19, Staying Healthy.” The goal of this webinar was to spread up-to-date information about Covid-19 conditions in France and to dispense professional advice about staying healthy to people of Chinese origin living in France. In more than three hours of discussion, the

6 This media group was registered in France in 1983, and today, as it handles current events in Europe, it has offices in different European countries. See the official website <http://www.oushinet.com>.

7 A recording of the webinar is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5-gGeR23Do/>. The three doctors are: Christian Huet, an emergency services doctor in Paris, at the Necker Hospital and the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital since 2001; Yanni Hu, a general practitioner, in a medical practice in the third arrondissement in Paris; Na Na, an emergency room doctor at Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, discussed earlier in this chapter.

audience raised more than fifty questions, ranging from differences between the two waves of the virus to treatments for Covid-19 and vaccine campaigns.

That same month (November 2020), *Ouzhou Shibao* organized a series of online conferences, dedicated to psychological support and resources during the pandemic for overseas Chinese living in Europe.<sup>8</sup> The four sessions focused on family communication,<sup>9</sup> managing stress and emotions,<sup>10</sup> music therapy,<sup>11</sup> and painting therapy.<sup>12</sup> Two of the speakers were mental health professionals living in China, and two other presenters live in France and Germany, respectively.

Chinese medicine and its ability to treat Covid-19 occupied a special place at these three events. This highlights the willingness of the Chinese state to bring Chinese medical norms to the international stage, through the globalization of Chinese medicine (Wang, 2019b). Together, these events reveal the ways in which Chinese-language medical and scientific information on Covid-19 has been made available to ordinary overseas Chinese. Expert resources can be found in France and other European countries, as well as in China. Thanks to digital tools and techniques, the sharing and transnational circulation of knowledge is made possible.

These virtual meetings with health-care professionals from China, France, and Europe can be seen as a kind of collective response to the worries of others, for their countrymen who live abroad, as a way to complement the health-care system in the living country. Some of these activities were organized at the behest of the Chinese state or of organizations that represent China abroad, such as the distribution to Chinese students of Covid-19 kits from China, coordinated by the education branch of the Chinese embassy in France. (For a more detailed analysis of this state-organized action, see Chapters 2, 7, and 12.) Finally, in our fieldwork, we noticed other types of self-organized treatment and preventive actions on the margins of the French health-care system, developed at the local level between neighbors in some residential housing developments, in areas with especially dense concentrations of low-income populations of Chinese origin (see Chapter 5). The Chinese diaspora population in France has organized diverse forms of treatment, structured through different subgroups of the Chinese people in France, based on social and professional status and residential address.

8 <http://www.oushinet.com/activity/web/content.html?apply=false&isApp=true&id=811415622129811456/>.

9 <http://www.oushinet.com/static/content/video/Chinatown/2020-11-30/784430363714781192.html>.

10 <http://www.oushinet.com/static/content/video/Chinatown/2020-11-30/784430363714781193.html>.

11 <http://www.oushinet.com/static/content/video/Chinatown/2020-12-07/789569777604493320.html>.

12 <http://www.oushinet.com/static/content/video/Chinatown/2020-12-07/789589123269656576.html>.



## 5 Conclusion

In the face of social inequality exacerbated by the pandemic, two types of treatment have become available—in the French health-care system and on its margins—and are complementary; both are indispensable for helping people to remain healthy and offer more equal access to Covid-19 care for immigrants.

Thanks to the medical professionals of Chinese origin who work in the French health-care system, more adapted medical care is available for the population of Chinese origin. The responses of these medical professionals, during this new and unprecedented health-care crisis, revealed the limits of the French health-care system, which does not sufficiently take into account the specific needs of foreign patients, particularly those who are vulnerable due to their language, culture, and socioeconomic status. Other health-care practices have developed on the margins of the French health-care system, among the Chinese diaspora in France. To protect, inform, and care for their overseas compatriots, people of Chinese origin have organized different forms of care and protection, sometimes in subaltern ways, at the local level, based on neighborhood relations, in places where there is a concentration of people of Chinese origin in the working and middle classes. One example is the development of a therapeutic aspect of Chinese medicine, which requires a care relationship centered on the person who is suffering and listening to the patient. Each subgroup of the Chinese population in France has mobilized the resources, information, and treatments that are available to that group.

Nonetheless, the public health crisis has not changed the health-care hierarchy, made up of the French system, which is grounded in a clinical Western medicine approach, and the so-called alternative medicine practices developed at its margins. It also has not overturned the professional relationship between medical actors—who work in hospitals and medical offices—and paramedical actors, as well as local governments and regional public health responses.

The gendered aspect of care work, observed in our fieldwork, should be emphasized. The health professionals we met are all female. The link between care and women might be obvious (Memmi, 2017), but it is relevant to mention the history of subaltern care and service work, which is mostly handled by women in the Chinese diaspora in France and, at the same time, the demographic characteristics of student movement from China to France, which is also mostly female, across disciplines (Campus France, 2021).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic changed the delivery of care, taking advantage of the

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13 Among the 29,731 Chinese students enrolled in degree programs in France in the 2019–2020 academic year, 60% are women.

internet, unlike any other event in modern history (Pierce et al., 2021). The virtual encounters described in this chapter can be understood as a form of collective caregiving by people of Chinese descent to Chinese people in China and elsewhere, complementing the living country's health-care system.

At this unprecedented moment, the response to Covid-19 has illuminated the potential for co-constructing intersectoral systems of action (particularly between the medical sector and the social sector) and for medical pluralism (patient-centered care) with regard to creating more equal access to health care and, at the same time, questioning the long-term feasibility of these changes. All these elements invite further reflection on the important component of care work in a therapeutic relationship, as well as the organization of care and the health sector (Butler, 2020; Green et al., 2022). By taking into account the vulnerability of racialized people and people of immigrant origin, the ethic of care demands a rethinking about the relationship with justice (Molinier, 2010; Paperman & Laugier, 2005) in the era of global health.

APPENDIX TABLE 11.1 Summary of the treatment plans of the six Covid-19 patients or relatives of patients interviewed

Patient or relatives of patient	Origin and profile	Period of infection/disease	First care sought	Second care sought
1 (Male) cousin of the patient interviewed	Chinese (migrant, came to France post 2010, PhD candidate)	October 2020	Practitioner of Chinese medicine (CM): prescription, entering in contact with Chinese herbalists in Belleville (end of treatment)	
2 (Male) son of the patient interviewed	Chinese (migrant, went to France in the 1990s, unskilled worker)	April–May 2020	French emergency services (SAMU) - Hospitalization - discharge of the hospital (end of treatment)	
			During the period of the first national lockdown in France, the family of the patient drank an herbal infusion of Chinese medicine as a preventive	

APPENDIX TABLE 11.1 Summary of the treatment plans of the six Covid-19 patients (*cont.*)

Patient or relatives of patient	Origin and profile	Period of infection/disease	First care sought	Second care sought
3 (Female) son of the patient	Chinese (migrant, went to France in the 1980s, unskilled worker)	April 2021	Practitioner of CM	SAMU - Hospitalization -discharge of the hospital (end of treatment)
4 (Female)	Chinese (descendant of Chinese migrants, born in France in the 1990s, skilled worker)	March 2020	General Practitioner (teleconsultation) – Covidom (website) online follow-up (end of treatment)  Her parents (living in the same household) are following various natural remedies (e.g., hot ginger beverages) since Covid-19	
5 (Female)	Chinese (descendant of Cambodian migrants of Chinese origin, born in France in the 1990s, skilled worker)	April 2020	General Practitioner (teleconsultation, prescription of the drug Dolipran) – Call for the SAMU (she was advised to stay at home; prescribed treatment with Doliprane) (end of treatment)	

APPENDIX TABLE 11.1 Summary of the treatment plans of the six Covid-19 patients (*cont.*)

Patient or relatives of patient	Origin and profile	Period of infection/disease	First care sought	Second care sought
6 (Female)	Chinese (migrant, went to France post 2010, skilled worker)	October 2020	Teleconsultation via the platform "Doctolib" (prescription for Doliprane)	Entering in contact with the Union of Chinese Researchers and Students in France (UCECF), receipt of the Covid-19 health kit distributed by the Chinese embassy in France. She took Chinese medicine <i>lianhua qingwen</i> in the Covid-19 health kit for ten days (end of treatment)

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# Beyond National and Ethnic Boundaries: Transnational Solidarity during the Covid-19 Pandemic from the Case of the Chinese Diaspora in France

*Simeng Wang and Yong Li*

## Abstract

In this chapter, authors show that the Chinese diaspora in France was proactive in responding to the pandemic: their demonstrations of transnational solidarity by sending and donating PPE were accompanied by the spread of ideas and expert knowledge; and these actions helped the Chinese population in France, institutions and relatives in China, and the living country to fight against Covid-19 and to mitigate its effects. The demonstrations at the beginning of the pandemic observed in the fieldwork recall the classical definition of transnationalism in migration, which is much more oriented toward the home country. But in the second phase analyzed in this chapter, the solidarity was shown with the living society and was mostly carried out by diasporic elites and leaders. Finally, during the normalization of the pandemic in French society, the demonstrations of transnational solidarity by the Chinese diaspora exceeded ethnic boundaries. Hence the meaning of transnationalism gradual widened to include solidarity and transnational circulation not only between Chinese in China and Chinese in France but also between Chinese in France and non-Chinese in France. In this way, this study illustrates that demonstrations of solidarity contribute to the renewal of diaspora organizations and strengthening the sense of belonging and the capacity for action by the diaspora. From a theoretical perspective, transnational solidarity seems to have been renewed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of this unprecedented global health crisis, the collaboration and community across national borders, ethnicities, and professions accelerated and evolved. These transnational practices performed by the Chinese diaspora in France should not be analyzed exclusively from the perspective of the homeland-oriented approach (nationalism/patriotism) or solely through the lens of the living country-oriented approach (the integration of Chinese people into French society). Rather, it should be studied from the perspective of the responsibility of global citizenship at a time of a worldwide crisis, which goes beyond health nationalism. Finally, the many actors in Chinese networks



and beyond who participated in offering assistance should be acknowledged: Chinese embassy and government representatives abroad, organization leaders and members, community workers, and ordinary Chinese in other countries. All the actions they took show the multiple scales and multiple directions of the activity. The synergy among all these different actors, not to mention the digital infrastructure, enabled the amassing of solidarity at an unprecedented magnitude.

## Keywords

transnational solidarity – Covid-19 pandemic – Chinese diaspora in France – migrants – descendants – transnationalism – PPE sending – health kit – expert knowledge – country of origin – living country – ethnic boundaries – diaspora organization – national borders – ethnic borders – bordering – global citizenship – digital infrastructure – diasporic elites and leaders – ordinary Chinese overseas

## 1 Introduction

Since its initial outbreak in Wuhan in December 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic has strained social ties around the world. The pandemic has been a unique global experience, arousing both exclusionary nationalist and inclusionary collective responses to various degrees (Berrocal et al., 2021; Holley, 2020; Délano Alonso & Samway, 2022). It has given rise to measures of self-isolation and mobility restriction in the name of security at the national and subnational level while, at the same time, raising the expectations of solidarity at a large transnational scale (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021). Simultaneous with cooperation between multinational corporations and states to deal with the risk posed by the health crisis is the emergence of grassroots actions to make connections in trying times, best illustrated by the mobilization of diasporas in different part of the world (IOM, 2020).

The initiatives of the Chinese diaspora during this pandemic represent an exemplary case of solidarity at a transnational scale. Since January 2020, health materials and medical knowledge have been massively distributed between China and other countries where Chinese people have settled. This phenomenon in which the Chinese diaspora comes together in times of crisis (political turmoil, war, natural disasters, etc.) is not new (Callahan, 2003). These movements reflect the attachment of diasporic Chinese to their country of origin, based on family ties, cultural identity, and political affiliation. In the past, however, they have almost always been in China's direction, toward their

disaster-stricken homeland. Thus this episode during the Covid-19 pandemic is an exception in many ways. For the first time since the flu pandemic in 1918, the developed world hosting Chinese diasporas has been struck by a health crisis. The global nature of the outbreak means that the Chinese diasporas must join forces with a multitude of actors and institutions from everywhere to combat a common threat. What is remarkable about the activities initiated by the Chinese diaspora since January 2020 is their tendency to transcend national and ethnic boundaries. First, the movement of materials and ideas was not in just one direction but in two directions: from their living country to China and then from China to their living country. Second, the transfers and sharing are not only within Chinese ethnic networks but also outside them.

During the Covid-19 period, transnational solidarity has been not only an analytical concept but also a moral stance. Calls to develop new forms of internationalism, spaces of solidarity, and exception (regarding the rights of migrants) have multiplied: community and civic responsibility must transcend national borders just as it must exist also within them. Citizenship and national borders should not become defining elements of who is entitled to protection and care and who is not (Triandafyllidou, 2022). This concept of transnational solidarity is consistent with that of Carol Gould (2007), who envisions it as a form of social empathy, with ties that bind people to distant others (individuals, social groups, associations). This solidarity functions as a concept of morality in global ethics and as an important social aspect of transnational democratic relationships among people struggling for the same causes (Rippe, 1998). We can call this new concept “networked solidarity,” or “pluralistic solidarity.” Transnational solidarity in the sense of cross-border social solidarity should be considered “overlapping solidaristic networks” (Gould, 2007). They can include social solidarity developed between individuals, communities, and organization of those with different cultural backgrounds and national identity as well as identity-based relationships among dispersed members of a community or polity—for example, the loyalty and patriotism felt by Chinese migrants toward their region of origin and their volunteering to help in China’s fight against the pandemic (Long, 2022; Rieger, 2022). In both cases, solidarity is characterized by “feeling with” mutual concern and mutual assistance (Gould, 2007; Mason, 2000).

The literature on China or the Chinese at the time of the pandemic highlights national, local, and community solidarity (Kwok et al., 2020; Miao et al., 2021; Tang & Li, 2021), but less so transnational solidarity developed by Chinese migrants. Several recent works examine the relationship between the Chinese state and Chinese populations during Covid-19, focusing on the role of the Chinese state in implementing policies of social control or extraterritorial governance over

its nationals, both at home and abroad (Ceccagno & Thunø, 2022; Liu, 2021). However, little research explores the forms of solidarity developed by grassroots actors and the conditions and the mechanisms of their mobilization.

In this chapter, we look closely at the Chinese diaspora in France. Our first objective is to understand the forms of transnational solidarity developed by the Chinese in France during the pandemic. These kinds of solidarity are both vertical, based on nationhood and according to a government plan (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021), and horizontal, developed by citizens and between citizens. They can express both intragroup (among Chinese people) and intergroup (between Chinese people and other people) relationships. Second, we describe the construction of this networked solidarity through the joint actions of individuals, groups, and associations. Taking a glocal perspective, we focus on the role of local actors, the links they forge, and the initiatives they develop at the transnational level. We show that grassroots actors, associations, volunteers, and health professionals of Chinese origin work alongside or in parallel to state governments and health systems to deal with the challenges of the pandemic. Third, we clarify the effect of the evolution of the pandemic on the meaning and objectives of Chinese diaspora mobilization. When the effects of Covid-19 were limited to China, the actions by the Chinese diaspora focused more on issues and needs related to their home country. When Covid-19 became pandemic, the Chinese people in France became more involved in their living society, speaking out in public and trying to influence political decisions and the attitudes and behavior of the majority group during the health crisis. Their involvement challenges the conventional view of Chinese people as an inward-looking and closed community.

Following the timeline of the pandemic, we analyze the Chinese diaspora's actions in three overlapping stages. We reconstruct the evolution of their activities from January to May 2020, when the epicenter of infection shifted from Asia to Europe and the spirit of solidarity was at its height. We illustrate that a solidarity movement initially oriented toward their home country turned into a transnational solidarity movement to confront a global threat, as the virus spread outside China. We discuss the role of Chinese diaspora solidarity in the fight against Covid-19 at the local and national level (in the living country) as well as the limits of its activity and its vulnerability.

## **2 Home-Country-Oriented Solidarity in the Context of a Health Emergency (from the End of January to the End of February 2020)**

After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in China in 2020, the Chinese diaspora around the world began to send PPE from their countries of residence to

China. Between the end of January and the end of February 2020, over 2 billion masks were estimated to have been sent to China from other countries (OECD, 2020). From January 2020 to February 2020, international health authorities talked about an epidemic spreading locally in China. In France, as in most European countries, the government claimed that it did not fear spread of the virus and was prepared to deal with it. During this period, although many Chinese people in France feared that the virus would spread to in France, they believed at the time that the crisis was limited to China and that their relatives there and Chinese institutions urgently needed help. In order to help their country of origin, Chinese people in France widely participated in sending medical materials (masks, medicines, etc.) and money to China.

In our study, 120 of the 381 respondents said that they had sent masks and other items to China, a remarkable participation rate (32%). The action taken most by our respondents (74 people) was sending masks, followed by sending money (62), other medical materials (20), and medicine (8).

We distinguish two motivations for these actions. First, at the individual level, as part of a “transnational caregiving” rationale, medical supplies were sent to geographically dispersed family members, friends, and relatives (Baldassar et al., 2007). Most of those who sent masks and other protective materials to China in January and February 2020 said they had sent them to their family, relatives, or friends (55). Above all, the gifts exchanged at the time of the crisis express people’s concern for one another, their feelings, and their desire to be helpful. Most of our respondents mainly obtained masks from pharmacies. In February, France had a general shortage of masks. Some respondents stated that they had gone to several pharmacies in the city where they live to obtain enough of them. In addition, our respondents also bought mask online or through people they know.

Second, if sending is in most cases a personal act, a minority of the respondents sent medical materials and money to China as members of a group. These collective actions fall under the heading of “diasporic humanitarian mobilization” (Rubyan-Ling, 2019) and are reminiscent of the solidarity displayed by overseas Chinese after the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. The respondents sent masks and other protective materials either to hospitals with which they were in contact (23) or to humanitarian organizations and other Chinese associations (14). Sixty-two people donated money to China, and the average amount was 126 euros. In most cases, these donations went to Chinese associations based in France for the purchase of medical materials destined for China. Some respondents also participated in online crowdfunding, in support of humanitarian organizations in China.

Although a minority among our respondents were involved in such group shipments, these efforts were considerable and sent a large quantity of

materials needed in China at the beginning of the pandemic. Chinese associations in France, thanks to their close connections to China, were particularly responsive to the crisis that had emerged on the other side of the world. When Wuhan was shut down on January 23, 2020, the Wuhan University Alumni Association in France began to solicit funds from its members. Thanks to the internet and social networks (a WeChat group), they identified the real needs at hospitals in China. Rather than ordering masks, the association purchased goggles, gloves, disinfectants, and ventilators in Europe. Then, they raised funds from its members for the purchase of PPE and other materials as well as their transportation to about thirty hospitals in Hubei Province.

Yi, an active member of this association, recalled:

At that time, our alumni association decided to do these things, and then suddenly we received a lot of information about domestic hospitals in distress, some of which was directly posted on the internet, and other information spread in various WeChat groups, and finally found us through others. ... We started to do an assessment of materials. We knew that the production of masks [in China] would recover very quickly, and then the price of masks was rising quickly because everyone was focused on buying masks. So, at the beginning of February we basically shifted the focus of our procurement from masks to protective clothing and protective eyewear. Then in late February, we started to look for equipment such as ventilators.

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Along the same lines, the members of the Association of Shandong Merchants in France (*Association des Commerçants du Shandong en France*, ACSF) mobilized starting at the end of January 2020. According to Mr. Xu, a Chinese restaurant owner who is a member of the ACSF and the Shandong Hometown Association, the ACSF mobilized its members to make donations at the beginning of the pandemic in China. Mr Xu donated 1,000 euros, and the ACSF as a whole donated nearly 20,000 euros and 600 sets of protective clothing to China and, later, to several social and welfare services in France (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, retirement homes, etc.). He sees China as his primary homeland and France as his secondary home.

In the context of a health emergency, in view of supply shortages, soaring prices for protective materials, and restrictions in international transportation, Chinese diaspora associations devoted a great deal of energy and developed some ingenious strategies for overcoming these obstacles. For example, the members of the Association of Former Legionnaires of Chinese Origin in France

(AALOCF) used their contacts in Eastern European countries to purchase PPE. The interviewees who were members of various associations also mentioned support that they received from Chinese authorities. The Chinese embassy in France and China's General Administration of Customs (GAC) greatly supported them with the preparation and shipment of medical supplies.

### 3 New Forms of Ethnic Solidarity beyond National Borders (End of January–End of March 2020): Medical Knowledge Being Disseminated and the Reversal of Transnational Solidarity Direction (from China to France)

#### 3.1 *The Key Role of Health-Care Workers and Scientists in Biology and Medicine of Chinese Origin: Medical Knowledge in Transnational Circulation*

When the first Covid-19 infection was detected in France (on January 24, 2021), the Chinese diaspora in France, particularly those working in medical professions, were very quickly warned. Dr. Na, a doctor of emergency medicine at a public hospital in Paris (see her detailed biography in Chapter 11), said:

We [doctors] knew that the virus would spread beyond the Chinese borders. Before its arrival in France, I was extremely careful about sanitation, whereas, at that time, most French people, including some medical colleagues, thought that it would remain in China, far from Europe.

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At this moment, the epidemic in China was spreading into a worldwide pandemic, and Dr. Na, as one of the few Chinese migrants with a background as a medical doctor who obtained permission to practice medicine in France and works at public hospitals, was aware of that and the deterioration in the health conditions there. For these reasons, thanks to her language skills and her medical background, she started to translate into French some of the earliest scientific findings and clinical data by Chinese scientists and doctors and to send these translations to French policy makers. By doing this, she skipped the intermediate stage of publication first in English, the most common path in the transnational dissemination of scientific knowledge. She explained:

This was about the time that Covid-19 emerged in Wuhan. So, the earliest literature and data all came from Wuhan—it was all Chinese data. So, at that time, outside China, we did not know anything. Because I was

originally a member of the medical faculty at Wuhan University, I have many former classmates in medicine who worked on the front lines of clinical work in Wuhan. They gave me a lot of valuable data. If you want to translate this Chinese data into English for publication in English-language journals, it normally takes at least two to three weeks. But I quickly translated the firsthand data I got at that time into French and sent it to the French Ministry of Health. [This was] at a very early stage, probably between the end of December and February, [and the data] included infected people who were asymptomatic, those with digestive symptoms, computed tomography results. ... Actually, at that time this data had not yet been published. By the time this information appeared in an article, I had already transmitted it to the health ministry as well as to the two big hospitals in Paris and research centers on infectious disease, Pitié-Salpêtrière [University Hospital] and Bichat [Bichat–Claude Bernard Hospital], which were the first places in France to offer treatment for Covid-19. ... We had a lot of arguments about the effectiveness of surgical masks, of the FFP2 masks, and on whether people should use them.

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In addition to disseminating scientific knowledge to scientific and government offices, as a doctor with a Chinese medical background working in the French health-care system, Dr. Na also gave some news conferences and interviews on French news media (France Inter radio and the TV channels France 5 and France 2), talking about the health conditions and commenting on the crisis management in China. Despite her translations of Chinese data into French and sharing related information about Covid-19, she found that the Chinese scientific findings do not seem to have been “taken into account, or at least not to have had any impact at the decision-making level,” particularly in the medical environment, among her professional peers, or by the government.

In addition to actions by health workers of Chinese origin, scientists in biology and medicine also helped to disseminate medical knowledge—for example, Yi, a public health researcher at the Georges Pompidou European Hospital in Paris.

In early March 2020, health workers at the Wuhan Zhongnan Hospital attended a virtual meeting with counterparts at the Georges Pompidou European Hospital in Paris, initiated by Yi and facilitated by the Alumni of Wuhan University in France, an organization in which Yi is an active member.

At the beginning of March, my colleagues at the hospital started to treat Covid-19 patients, and, in a casual conversation, they said that they had encountered some clinical challenges, in particular extremely rapid deterioration, about two hours, of certain patients, who needed immediate intensive care. The doctors here lacked relevant experience in dealing with such a new disease and were confused because they did not know why the patients deteriorated so quickly. Afterward, I contacted some Chinese doctors working on the front lines in Wuhan, who mentioned that they had some relevant experience. Based on some of these preliminary contacts and exchanges, I thought that it might be meaningful and useful to organize an e-meeting between doctors and experts in both places for some face-to-face communication about clinical experience with Covid. I brought up the idea to Shen, the president of our alumni association of graduate students in France from Wuhan University. He supported the proposal and contacted Mr. Zhao, the vice president of Wuhan Zhongnan Hospital, who was very interested and enthusiastic. He had obtained his medical degree and a PhD in medicine in France, so his French is very fluent. For my part, I contacted over twenty French doctors at the European Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital who specialized in respiratory, cardiovascular, and digestive systems and in kidney disease. They all attended this e-meeting. Those attending online from Wuhan Zhongnan Hospital included two vice presidents of the hospital, a director of the emergency department, and a director of respiratory intensive care. Many exacting and detailed questions were raised during this meeting: epidemiology, how many patients need to be in intensive care, how many patients need to be intubated, and statistical data. ... After the meeting, French experts compiled detailed minutes and shared them not only at the European Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital but across Facebook groups of health-care workers. They thought at the time that because China had obtained important firsthand experience, it was important to share information with French practitioners.

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This situation recalls the social conditions that enable the transnational dissemination of scientific knowledge. First, Yi and her fellow alumni already have established formal and informal networks with the scientific and medical community in Wuhan, the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic. This enabled them to play a role as initiators, facilitators, and mediators to set up this meeting. Second, Dr. Zhao's profile and social trajectory, as the current vice



president of Wuhan Zhongnan Hospital, is also a key element in the mobilization of scientific experts. Dr. Zhao trained in France and now held a position high in the professional hierarchy at Wuhan hospital, with more than twenty years of experience in international student exchange programs between China and France in medicine. His background and experience were useful in quickly setting up this online meeting on the treatment of Covid-19 at an early stage of the pandemic.

### 3.2 *The Direction of Transnational Circulation Changes, Now from China to France*

Europe became the epicenter of the pandemic starting in late February 2020, when the direction of the dissemination of scientific knowledge changed. China was no longer a country that only received transnational aid and medical equipment, especially masks, as discussed in the previous section; it had now become a country exporting information and its first findings about the pandemic. In addition, the direction in which masks and medical equipment were sent also reversed. By mid-March, China seemed to have gotten the pandemic under control and increased its production of masks and other PPE in sufficient quantities to begin to distribute them elsewhere, whereas France, like other European countries, had a shortage of masks and other protective gear.

Hence, the flow of assistance also changed direction. About two-thirds (231 people, or 61%) of the respondents said they had received medical supplies from China since mid-March 2020. The balance is in favor of the living country, because one-third of the respondents had sent medical supplies out, and two-thirds had received them.

Specifically, 218 respondents said they had received masks (57% of all respondents), 67 said they had received medicine (17%), and 61 said they had received other protective materials (16%). In most cases, these materials had been sent by their family (127) or friends (66); otherwise, they were distributed by the Chinese embassy (75) or by a Chinese association in France (25).

The Wuhan University alumni shipped the last batch of medical supplies from France to China at the end of February 2020. At that point, the alumni association decided to support French hospitals and institutions. This is how Yi and Mr. Shen described that process:

- Q: So that means basically you and your association did not end your transnational solidarity in the spring of 2020?
- Shen: Yes, basically. If we take the metaphor of a sports match, we could say that we played the first half to help China, and then there was

no break, and in the second half we went straight to supplying France.

- Yi: Beginning in March, we provided a lot of medical material to French services, including provincial hospitals, the SAMU emergency center in Paris, and so on. We worked with several organizations (governmental and nongovernmental) to help transport medical supplies from China to France. In addition to medical materials, we also made a [financial] donation to the Pasteur Institute, for basic research in virology [on Covid-19]. Because we all live and work in France, after the beginning of the pandemic in France, we all agreed it was very important to support the French.

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Indeed, starting in March 2020, the Chinese diaspora in France focused mainly on supporting France. The transnational solidarity mentioned can be understood at two levels: the first relates to the change in direction for supplies, in which France became a receiving country in terms of scientific knowledge and medical supplies; and the second refers to the fact that the assistance from China benefited not only Chinese people in France but also the general French population. In other words, transnational solidarity between China and France, supported by the Chinese diaspora in France, goes beyond ethnic boundaries.

#### 4 **New Forms of Solidarity in the Living Country (End March–May 2020): Helping Chinese Compatriots Living in France and the General French Population**

The spread of the pandemic to France changed the direction of the flow of aid and led to new forms of solidarity both among the Chinese in France and across ethnic boundaries. Faced with the threat posed by Covid-19 and socio-economic problems in their living country, the Chinese in France overcame their fear of the virus to rebuild social ties. Amid the restrictions on travel and gatherings, as well as mandates to maintain physical distance, the Chinese in France developed methods of sharing and obtaining supplies that exemplify the notion of “being apart together.”

##### 4.1 *Solidarity among Chinese People in France*

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese embassy in France began to target Chinese living in France, particularly students, for extending several

health-care measures and announced them in various channels. These measures covered several industries and evolved over time. During the first lockdown in France, which lasted for about seven weeks (March 17–May 11, 2020), the distribution of the large amount of PPE from China to Chinese people in France faced a major challenge because of travel restrictions. In March 2020, the Chinese embassy in France also started to distribute Covid-19 health kits to Chinese nationals in France, specifically focusing on students (see also Chapter 7). These kits typically contained Chinese medicine, masks, and protective gloves. The Union of Chinese Students and Researchers in France (*Union des Chercheurs et des Étudiants Chinois en France*, UCECF) played an important role in the distribution of medical supplies through its network throughout France. Instead of asking the beneficiaries to obtain them at a distribution point, UCECF members distributed the PPE in their neighborhood, within the one-kilometer zone designated by the government for local travel.

The UCECF was formed in Paris in 1986. Its purpose is to promote sharing of studies, information, experience, and ideas among Chinese students in France, with each branch working independently. It has local offices in various cities (Paris, Marseille, Lyon, etc.) as well as at some large universities in France. Legally, this organization is solely French (created in France in accordance with French law). However, it was created by Chinese students with funding by the Chinese government, thus their relationship with the Chinese embassy in France is very close, and it is considered an executive organization within the Education Department of the embassy.

In March 2020, the Chinese embassy addressed a letter to the parents of Chinese students in France, inviting them to get in contact about any difficulties. Following is the letter published on the embassy's official website on March 14, 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Dear students and parents,

The current conditions in the global Covid-19 pandemic are on the minds of all students studying in France and their parents in China. Over the past few days, we have received many calls from students and parents concerned about the development of the pandemic in France, the measures taken by the French government to prevent and control the pandemic, and the academic and living arrangements of students in France. We are very concerned about this and understand the anxiety of the students and their parents due to the pandemic.

<sup>1</sup> Translated from the original Chinese into French at: <http://france.lxgz.org.cn/france/lxels/palx/2021072709524996943/index.html>.

... At this stage, we ask you to remain objective, rational, and calm, to take into account your studies and personal health, and to do the following.

First, pay attention to personal hygiene and minimize travel.

Second, comply with the teaching schedule at French schools and try not to overlook your studies.

Third, believe in the power of science and study hard to serve your country.

Fourth, you should actively exercise and improve your immunity with balanced nutrition.

Fifth, pay attention to your personal health conditions and seek medical attention when necessary.

Dear students, the motherland is always concerned about your health and safety. We hope that you will work together, unite with each other, and overcome the difficulties together, so that we can get through the pandemic period safely!

#### 4.2 *The Distribution of Covid-19 Health Kits by the Chinese Embassy in France and the UCECF*

With the help of the UCECF, the Chinese embassy in France not only offered assistance but began to distribute Covid-19 health kits, from March 17, when the first lockdown was imposed in France, until September 2020.

The first batch of 1,029 boxes of health kits, including masks, disinfectant wipes, and pandemic prevention manuals, arrived at the Education Department of the embassy on March 31, 2020. After four days of organization, the Education Department staff and their families assembled nearly 12,000 health kits in overtime. On April 2, 2020, the embassy held a ceremony to launch the distribution of these kits for Chinese students in France. Ambassador Lu Shaye attended the ceremony and gave them to Chinese student representatives of various universities.

The Education Department sent a notice to all the students registered at the embassy regarding the kits, in addition to Chinese language teachers and volunteers. The embassy asked all people who were interested in obtaining the health kit to fill in a form on the embassy's website (see Figure 12.1), which asked for information on the name, school, address, the year of arrival in France, and so forth, and then designed a distribution plan based on geographic location. Chinese students and teachers who filled in this form were also asked for a copy of their passport or student identification card.

Because of the travel restrictions to local neighborhoods, the kits were distributed in three ways: by mail, by car, and by pickup. In the first wave of distribution, the embassy delivered a total of nearly 12,000 kits to students.

**01 是否缺少防疫物资 \***

是

否

**02 姓名(中文): \***

例: 张三

**03 姓名(拼音) \***

例: ZHANG San

**04 邮寄地址(请确认填写可以收取包裹的完整地址) \***

例: 123 rue de abc, 75001 paris

**05 身份类别 \***

选择当前情况

在校学生

港澳台生

预科班学生 (包括语言生)

2018年5月后毕业生 (含APS)

2020留法新生

**06 留学单位名称 (学校或所在单位) : \***

请用法文填写

**07 联系电话: \***

请填写手机号码 (06XXXXXXXX)

**08 证件号码 (护照号): \***

护照号

**09 完整的留学生注册登记表截图 \***

复制链接接进行注册: <http://194.177.47.190/EDUCHINE/>

FIGURE 12.1 Online form to register for receiving a Covid-19 health kit

According to information filled in online form, the UCECF divided the city into several zones according to the geographical division (see Figure 12.2) and then asked for volunteers to help with handing out the kits. Volunteers, twenty people who lived nearby and who would be interested in getting Covid-19 kits, could become contact people. After the kits were distributed, the UCECF called all the students who had requested the kits to confirm that they had received them.

Fei, who had volunteered to act as a contact person, described the organization of handing out the health kits near her home:

I am a member of the UCECF at Sorbonne University. I live in the second arrondissement in Paris (75002) and was given responsibility for distribution in this vicinity. Later, I received thirty to fifty health kits (in three boxes) delivered in person by officials at the Chinese embassy in France. Students in the neighborhood, within 1 kilometer, came to my place to pick them up downstairs in the entryway.

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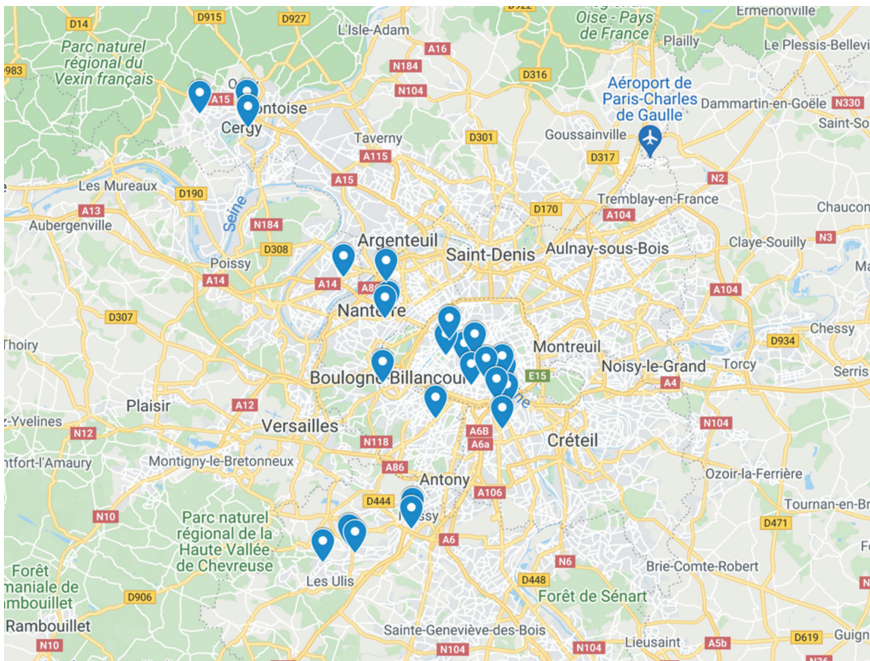


FIGURE 12.2 Mapping of the distribution of Covid-19 health kits in the Paris region  
PRODUCED BY MIGRACHICOVID TEAM

#### 4.3 *Other Help Offered by the Chinese Embassy through the Activities of the UCECF*

Other embassy activities also focused on students, by providing health care and Chinese medicine to those who had been infected with Covid-19, creating WeChat groups to communicate about the evolution of the pandemic, and sharing information.

First, as part of providing health care and Chinese medicine to infected students, the embassy invited students needing help to call the embassy in France by cellphone and request the Chinese drug *lianhua qingwen*.

As Yujia, a twenty-nine-year-old graduate student at SKEMA Business School, said:

When I got Covid-19, I was alone in my studio [apartment]. I was fortunate that the education service of the embassy and the UCECF knew about my infection. They had some *lianhua qingwen* delivered to me at my home.

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Second, the volunteers of the UCECF created WeChat groups so that students could help one another and to facilitate access to health care. In March 2020, the UCECF set up several WeChat groups so that it could better understand the needs of Chinese students in France. These groups were in two main types. The first type was set up to enable Chinese students in France to engage in mutual assistance. After March 5, 2020, it had formed sixteen groups called the Group for Exchanging Mutual Assistance among Students Abroad, each of which had more than 450 members. In these groups, the UCECF regularly posted important information related to Covid-19 (new policies, the number of infections, etc.).

The second type had more specific goals and mainly focused on exchanging information related to health and mental health issues (Covid-19 testing, e-health monitoring, vaccination information). Since March 2020, the UCECF had formed at least three groups (Sino-French Medical Consultation; French-Guangdong Youth Volunteer Consultation Group; Mental Health Counseling Group). The membership in each group consisted of more than 300 students, posed questions asking for medical advice and searched for mental health help.

At the same time, the Chinese embassy in France and the UCECF also held several webinars with Chinese medical experts for students on the prevention and treatment of Covid-19 (see Chapter 11). For example, on March 5, 2020, the first secretary of the Education Department of the Chinese embassy in

France hosted a webinar on “Knowledge on the Prevention and Control of Coronavirus,” targeting Chinese students in France and also attended by relevant embassy staff. Dr. Na, emergency doctor working at a hospital introduced *supra*, and Dan Fan, the general manager of Asia Pacific Region at the Fangzheng Pharmaceutical Group in France, were invited to share their knowledge and experience as experts and to explain the philosophy and measures by the French government and medical system to prevent and control the pandemic. Jin Yang, the educational counsellor at the Chinese embassy to France, also participated in the webinar and conveyed the concern of the Chinese Ministry of Education and the embassy to the students in France. He encouraged them to remain confident, persevere in their studies, and pay attention to their health. Afterward, a Q&A session was held to answer questions by the students. The webinar was streamed live on YouTube and available for replaying later as well. The webinar was viewed by more than 8,100 that day, and by May 2022, it had received 20,246 views on YouTube.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, all the actions targeting students initiated by the embassy (mostly carried out by the UCECF) are to showcase the Chinese state caring for students, to contact students’ families in case of an emergency, as well as to collect digital information on students on the move in order to better manage the data on them.

Undeniably, the support activities by Chinese people not only employed a top-down approach (e.g., from the embassy to students) but also horizontally, among ordinary Chinese citizens in the everyday life. These efforts involved not just medical materials and caregiving but also daily necessities. For example, Chinese entrepreneurs played a role in social solidarity among the Chinese ethnic communities by serving residential areas in the northern suburbs of Paris (see Chapter 5), where they are concentrated. These Chinese residents mainly come from Wenzhou and Fujian, and many of them are engaged in various commercial activities in France, such as catering, imports and exports, and retail (as entrepreneurs or employees). During the first lockdown period, most restaurants and shops were closed. Many Chinese, especially those who are working class and whose living conditions are the most precarious, encountered financial difficulties in their daily lives because of recent or prior unemployment. In order to ensure that these people had adequate medical supplies (e.g., masks and hand sanitizer) and food (fruits and vegetables), some entrepreneurs worked with Chinese neighborhood mutual assistance groups to coordinate and order daily necessities from merchants and deliver

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3SraqkyWCI&t=631s/>.



them to their homes at a specific time. This enabled people to obtain necessary supplies without having to go out shopping. Chinese entrepreneurs also help by distributing food to Chinese people whose living conditions are precarious (see Chapter 8). Chinese entrepreneurs, together with Chinese voluntary associative actors, played a central role in building social solidarity among Chinese communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### 4.4 *Solidarity beyond Ethnic Boundaries*

The donation of medical supplies was not limited to the Chinese community but, rather, extended to the wider French population. In interviews, our respondents said that when they received protective materials, they shared them with their French friends, teachers, neighbors, etc. The Chinese diaspora associations, for their part, distributed many protective materials to French institutions and groups (medical practitioners, nurses, police officers, etc.).

For example, Ms. Yu, a migrant who is forty-one years old, worked at a travel agency before the Covid-19 pandemic. She is a member of a Chinese church in Paris, which became very involved in the transnational shipment of masks after the pandemic began.

Since April and May 2020, our church has focused on the collection of masks and protective medical supplies in China and then on shipping and distributing them in France. We wanted to make donations to French hospitals, but we did not know how or which offices to contact. So my roommate and I decided to distribute masks to our neighbors: we put two masks into envelopes and put them into their mailboxes. We did this for approximately eighty families, not only those who are Chinese but also those who are Arabs, Black, and Italian. The residence is very ethnically mixed. ... Another member of the church, who works as a cashier in a supermarket, distributed masks at the cashier to people in need.

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As she said, at this phase of the pandemic, the destination of transnational aid was mainly France. Members of the Chinese diaspora showed their willingness to help the French population, in particular, at hospitals. However, as they are not always familiar with the French health-care system, they do not always know how to make a donation. As such, health professionals of Chinese origin in France have played a significant role in the coordination of donations and the distribution of resources (an issue to which we return in the next section).

Another example is Mr. Zhang, the owner of a hotel chain (consisting of a dozen hotels) in Paris, who offered assistance during the first lockdown (March–May 2020) to French people. He encouraged people to continue working during the pandemic as long as they complied with anti-Covid protocols. He always emphasized the ethnic diversity of the employees (numbering about 180, they comprise not only Chinese workers but also those of other ethnic minorities and non-immigrants). This low self-employment rate strategy (meaning that the proportion of employees of Chinese origin remains relatively low in the company of Mr. Zhang) enabled him to keep the hotels open during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020 because the Chinese employees are more affected by what happened in China and all of them chose to stay at home to protect themselves and their loved ones. They were reluctant to keep working in March, April and even July 2020 according to Mr. Zhang (Wang and Chen, 2021) and to offer shelter to police officers, health-care workers, and social workers, as well as also homeless people and victims of domestic violence. Through these activities, he earned a stable clientele and a good reputation. He was interviewed in the French media and published a diary, documenting his thoughts and work during the first lockdown. He presents a typical example of combining business considerations with social responsibility, which enabled his company to remain profitable despite huge obstacles and enabled him to burnish his business reputation, which will benefit his future business activities.

In the same spirit, Chinese entrepreneurs in France set up additional production lines to meet the urgent needs of the general public. At the beginning of the pandemic, one vice president of a chamber of commerce started to produce masks in France and another started to produce the hand sanitizer; their products soon gained a considerable share of the French market. Thanks to these efforts at the right time, gaps in the local market were filled with local supplies at a critical moment, preventing price increases in important medical supplies due to scarcity.

#### 4.5 *The Significant Role of Health Workers of Chinese Origin in the Coordination of Donations of Protective Medical Supplies in France*

Dr. Lei, arrived in France in 2000 and graduated from a medical school in Paris, is now a general practitioner at a medical office in Bussy-St-Georges (30 kilometers from Paris), in Seine et Marne. On March 27, 2020, with her mediation, the Anti-Covid Center in Seine et Marne (located in Lagny sur Marne) received 1,700 protective gowns, donated by three Chinese churches in France: the

Chinese Evangelical Church in Paris (EECP), the Chinese Evangelical Church of France, and the Chinese Protestant Church of Paris.

Dr. Na also illustrates the role of mediator played by medical experts and health workers of Chinese origin. In March 2020, she launched a mask collection initiative in China to help French hospitals, retirement homes, and kindergartens. Three WeChat groups were quickly created in support of this initiative and attracted over 300 volunteers. She commented:

I feel that the Chinese and overseas Chinese are very united. When I launched this idea, I did not think that so many people would respond and that so many people would actively join us, despite their risk of infection. ... Even now, I still wear a mask donated by Chinese volunteers [laughs] whom I've never met, but we talk every day on WeChat. I developed really good friendships with a lot of people—we've become very good friends. They wanted to protect me by giving me masks, and in turn I wanted to do something practical for them: the Chinese and everyone in France. ... When I was organizing the mask donations and a Chinese hotline, ... for three months [from March to May 2020], I slept six hours a day, and at other times I began work just after waking up. It was tiring but worth it. I really hope that after this pandemic is over, I can personally thank all the people who protected me and helped me, with whom I have worked.

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This third phase of solidarity in the living country highlights the extension of assistance within Chinese networks and beyond by multiple actors: representatives of the Chinese embassy and government in France, associative leaders and members, community workers, ordinary Chinese, and so on. All their activities demonstrate multiscalar and multidirectional solidarity: from the bottom up, from the top down, and horizontal mutual assistance, at the neighborhood, national, and supranational levels, not just among Chinese networks but between them and the majority French society.

## 5 Conclusion

The pandemic forces us to reconsider the notions of belonging, citizenship, borders, community, and solidarity in global and transnational settings. Our study of the Chinese diaspora in France illustrates the importance of looking at the Covid-19 pandemic from a diasporic perspective. In France, the Chinese diaspora was more proactive in responding to the pandemic than the local

population and the French government. Their transnational solidarity shown in sending and donating PPE was accompanied by the dissemination of ideas and expert knowledge. Their actions helped the Chinese population in France, institutions and relatives in China, and France to combat Covid-19 and to mitigate its effects.

This case study sheds light on how transnational solidarity enables us to understand the Chinese diaspora on the move in times of crisis: the Chinese diaspora is able to meet the major challenges by activating its networks, thanks to its geographic dispersion, its autonomy in relation to nation-states, its multiple anchoring, and so on. In the first phase of the pandemic, the transnational solidarity observed in our fieldwork recalls the classical definition of transnationalism in migration, which is mostly oriented toward the home country. In the second phase, analyzed in this chapter, the direction of solidarity shifted toward the living society, mostly enacted by diasporic elites and leaders. Finally, in the third phase, that of normalization of the pandemic in French society, this transnational solidarity leaped its ethnic borders and extended to the broader population. Thus, the meaning of transnationalism gradually expanded, from solidarity and transnational circulation not only between Chinese in China and Chinese in France but also between Chinese in France and non-Chinese in France. By exploring this dynamic, our study traces the contribution of solidarity to the revitalization of diaspora organizations, to strengthening the sense of belonging by the diaspora and of its capacity for action.

From a theoretical perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have had the effect of renewing transnational solidarity. Because of this unprecedented global health crisis, cross-border, ethnic, and professional collaboration and solidarity have actively accelerated and changed. Our study shows the multiscalar and multidirectional of the solidarity actions. Only the synergies between various actors, state and non-state, Chinese and non-Chinese, without forgetting the digital infrastructure, allowed a solidarity mobilization of such magnitude. Analysis of these transnational actions by the Chinese diaspora in France should employ neither an exclusively homeland-oriented perspective (nationalism/patriotism) nor a solely living country-oriented perspective (integration of the Chinese migrants into French society). Rather, it should take the perspective of global citizenship and examine its meaning and its responsibility at a time of worldwide crisis (Ramsari, 2020), in order to offer a counterpoint to health nationalism.

However, the strength of the diaspora should not obscure the limits of its actions and vulnerability. The transnational circulation of medical knowledge had insignificant impact on the political decisions of French government. The transnational circulation of medical supplies revealed dilemmas and controversies as well as the strength and limits of diasporic solidarity in the face of

the health crisis in the context of political tensions between China and some countries in the West. For example, when Europe became the epicenter of the pandemic, some people in France accused the Chinese there of having exacerbated the shortage of medical supplies in the country by sending their massive amounts of PPE to China. The increase in transnational solidarity activity among the Chinese diaspora does not mean the advent of a cosmopolitan era or fraternization among peoples (see Chapter 5). It might also resurrect the suspicion of disloyalty by Chinese people and the fantasy of a fifth column among a portion of the population in Western countries. In a world governed by the system of nation-states, the tension between transnationalism and nationalism will be long-lasting.

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# Conclusion

*Simeng Wang*

Richard Horton (2020), the editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, calls for considering Covid-19 a syndemic, which reveals biological and social interactions that are important for prognosis, treatment, and health policy. This approach invites a larger vision, encompassing education, employment, housing, food, and the environment. In his essay, he gave the examples of vulnerable people—the elderly as well as Black, Asian, and other minority ethnic communities—and predicted that no matter how effective a treatment or protective a vaccine is, the pursuit of a purely biomedical solution to Covid-19 will fail. A full solution requires a reduction in social disparities and more equitable access to health care and social welfare. As part of incorporating a sociological view of health and illness into this solution, our book is an invitation to pay attention to social conditions and inequalities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This volume shows the extent to which the living conditions of Chinese populations abroad are connected to both their country of origin and their living country. Several chapters describe the existence of a gap in terms of social experiences (attitudes, portrayals, and behaviors) between Chinese people in France and the French majority. This is undoubtedly due to social inequalities between racial/ethnic minorities and the majority, in terms of access to health care, housing conditions, food access, institutional racism, and racial discrimination. At the same time, the book reveals the differences in the strength and the intensity of the connections to China among the respondents to our survey: for some, China is the motherland, and, for others, it is the home country of their parents. The pandemic reshaped their relationship, both material and symbolic, to China.

Another feature of the book is our attention to heterogeneity among the Chinese population in France in terms of the social experiences and living conditions during the pandemic. Indeed, Chinese people in France were already experiencing social inequalities and social differentiation before Covid-19, and, as illustrated in many chapters, the pandemic had different impacts on them depending on their age, gender, migratory generation, social background, education level, profession, and regional origin in China. Hence, an intersectional approach that recognizes these various social relationships proved essential for understanding the differentiated social representations and practices adopted by Chinese people in France during the health crisis (i.e., media consumption, preventive measures, self-reported stress, food behaviors, mutual assistance,

community protection). Doing otherwise risked falling into a vision of this immigrant population that is reductive and relativizing.

In this book, we make contributions to three distinguished academic fields: studies of overseas Chinese, migration studies, and global health studies, especially during a global health crisis.

First, this volume fills a gap in the study of Chinese overseas, with respect to the following research topics relatively unstudied concerning Chinese migrants and descendants, in particular those residing in Europe: multiple roles played by WeChat, media consumption, health and mental health, racism and discrimination, aging and care of the elderly, and food behaviors. We have seen the extent to which the Chinese application WeChat is omnipresent in the everyday life of overseas Chinese, all the more so during the pandemic, as mentioned throughout the book. It is also analyzed the potential for a digital transformation in the post-Covid world (Kuah & Dillon, 2022), including the transnational platform capitalism (Boyer, 2020) among the Chinese diaspora and beyond it.

Second, this book adopts a multiscalar perspective and articulates local, national, and transnational analytic scales. “Actor-oriented” and “policy-driven” approaches have been combined to study a diaspora, which enabled us to make “bottom-up” as well as “top-down” analyses of the same phenomenon and social practices. For example, the empirical data that we collected by interviewing Chinese students in France about the distribution of Covid-19 health kits (see Chapter 12) produced knowledge on diaspora policies from below. It showed how the distribution actually operated in the space that connects the State and the diaspora, which is mostly composed of individuals with diverse social profiles. In this sense, varying the perspectives helps to demystify the way in which the Chinese regime operates in the implementation of its diaspora policies and in its relations with overseas Chinese.

Third, from a theoretical perspective, the volume illustrates the heuristic value of a study on the diaspora to apprehend the global dimension of this health crisis and its multiple and differential effects on the migrant populations and their descendants. Because of the temporalities and spatiality it encompasses, the analytical category of a “diaspora” proved ideal for understanding a transnational phenomenon such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The transnational perspective created by observing a diaspora enabled us to examine the effects of this pandemic on the practices and lifestyles of migrants and their descendants, living in a situation of in-between. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is all the more revealing to study the Chinese diaspora. Given that the virus first emerged in China, the Chinese diaspora has suffered from its consequences, including racialization of the virus and stigmatization. Moreover, the fact that China is a big actor in the global production chain for medical supplies



(protective masks, medical equipment, etc.) enables overseas Chinese to participate in the provision and transnational shipment of masks and other medical supplies, to ensure different forms of transnational solidarity, and to respond not only to members of the diaspora but also to the living countries. In summary, using a diasporic approach creates greater understanding of the social consequences of a pandemic at multiple levels as well as the emergence of new forms of connections, community, and struggles in the context of a global crisis.

This book has a few limitations. The first one is its reliance on a survey carried out in the fieldwork on a health crisis while it was occurring (2020–2022). Studying a social event while it is in progress presents several challenges for researchers, in particular methodological difficulties. The second is that, because of international travel restrictions, we could not go to China and conduct multisited ethnographies there.

Two main reflections emerged as directions for future research that deserved to be mentioned. First, starting from a baseline of knowledge offered by chapters here included, further research is needed to explore the following themes over a long period: mobility and immobility after the pandemic; globalization and deglobalization; geographic, symbolic, ethnic and racial bordering. The results presented in this book might be put into discussion with other work in the future—for example, the social, economic, political and geopolitical effects of Covid-19 on Chinese diasporic policy making in the digital era and on changes in the migratory paths taken by Chinese migrants and their descendants living in Europe. Secondly, it would be interesting to compare our findings not only with researches carried out on Chinese people residing in other European countries and beyond; but also with studies dealing with the experiences of other ethnic and racial minorities in France or around the world (Banerjea, 2021; Smith et al., 2022).

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# Postface

## 1 English version

Reading this book, one can only admire the tour de force accomplished: the investigation conducted by Simeng Wang and her team offers an example of an emergency research, quickly set up, but nevertheless well organized and very thorough. The approach adopted is genuinely multidisciplinary, since it combines sociology, anthropology, political science, information and communication science, social psychology and, of course, public health – an essential cocktail for building a true science of migration. The survey crosses qualitative and quantitative methods, from in-depth interviews, conducted in several languages, to the mastery of inferential statistics.

One of the strengths of the survey is its experimental dimension. The pandemic, to speak like economists, is a “natural experiment”. Or, rather than the pandemic, the pandemic management methods, which have varied greatly from one phase to the next, in China as in France, but also between China and France. The book confirms the revealing power of the pandemic: it has shed a raw light on the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese diaspora in France, but also the strengths and weaknesses of the French management of the epidemic. It does not only reveal the pre-existing inequalities between generations, between social backgrounds, between migratory trajectories, or legal statuses. It also shows the considerable role of the media and, more specifically, of the competition between the media of the country of origin and those of the country of destination, especially in the sphere of social networks.

While the survey duly points out the resurgence of racism and prejudice against Asians in French society, it does not confine itself to this perspective. The approach is not “victimary,” it strongly highlights the resilience, adaptation and innovation capacities of the Chinese diaspora in France; it emphasizes the development of solidarity, which is not limited to community solidarity. These capacities for resistance and innovation existed before the health crisis, but the crisis has greatly developed them, particularly in the field of digital commerce or food consumption patterns, studied in two fascinating chapters.

We thus understand better than ever that the integration of Chinese immigrants and their descendants into French society cannot be limited to a one-way process. Immigrants and natives, French and Chinese, can learn from each other. Transnational practices, which the French legislation tends to ignore or even combat, are not a major obstacle to integration but one of its inevitable

facets in a globalized world. The health crisis has evolved over time as well as its effects. At first, it tended to separate the populations, but, in the longer term, brought them closer together. Is this too optimistic a view? It is the approach resolutely adopted by Simeng Wang and her team. It is amply justified by the results obtained.

The reader who knew little about the Chinese diaspora in France (as is my case) now knows much more. And that reader begins to dream. Could this type of survey be extended to other migratory flows, to other diasporas? Representative general surveys have been conducted throughout France, which are still ongoing, such as the vast longitudinal EpiCov (Epidemiology and living conditions under Covid-19) survey, mainly funded by Inserm, the National Institute of Health and Medical Research, and conducted jointly with Insee, the national statistical office. These general surveys provide an essential background to the analysis of the effects of the pandemic on the populations of France. But these general surveys in no way dispense with carrying out monographs concentrating the maximum of skills and knowledge on a particular diaspora. This is the great merit of the project carried out by Simeng Wang and her team.

## 2 Version française

À la lecture de cet ouvrage, on ne peut qu'être admiratif devant l'exploit accompli : l'enquête menée par Simeng Wang et son équipe offre l'exemple d'une recherche d'urgence, rapidement montée, mais néanmoins solidement organisée et très approfondie. L'approche adoptée est authentiquement pluridisciplinaire, puisqu'elle allie sociologie, anthropologie, science politique, science de l'information et de la communication, psychologie sociale et, bien sûr, santé publique – un cocktail indispensable pour bâtir une véritable science des migrations. L'enquête combine méthodes qualitatives et méthodes quantitatives, depuis les entretiens approfondis, menés en plusieurs langues, jusqu'à la maîtrise d'une statistique inférentielle. Un des points forts de l'enquête est sa dimension expérimentale : la pandémie, pour parler comme les économistes, est une « expérience naturelle ». Ou, plutôt que la pandémie, les modes de gestion de la pandémie, qui ont fortement varié d'une phase à l'autre, en Chine comme en France, mais aussi entre la Chine et la France.

L'ouvrage confirme à quel point l'épreuve de la pandémie a joué comme un puissant révélateur des forces et des faiblesses de la diaspora chinoise, mais aussi des forces et des faiblesses de la gestion française de l'épidémie. Elle ne dévoile pas seulement les inégalités préexistantes entre les générations, entre les milieux sociaux, entre les parcours migratoires, entre les statuts juridiques. Elle montre aussi le rôle considérable des moyens d'information et, plus

spécialement, de la concurrence entre les médias du pays d'origine et ceux du pays de destination, y compris et surtout dans la sphère des réseaux sociaux.

Si l'enquête met dûment le projecteur sur la résurgence du racisme et des préjugés à l'encontre des Asiatiques au sein de la société française, elle ne s'enferme pas dans cette perspective. L'approche n'est pas victimaire, elle met en avant les capacités de résilience, d'adaptation et d'innovation de la diaspora chinoise ; elle souligne avec force le développement des solidarités, qui ne se limitent pas à la solidarité communautaire. Ces capacités de résistance et d'innovation préexistaient à la crise sanitaire, mais la crise les a fortement développées, notamment dans le domaine du commerce digital ou de la consommation alimentaire, étudiés dans des chapitres passionnants.

On comprend ainsi, mieux que jamais, que l'intégration des immigrés chinois et de leurs descendants au sein de la société française ne peut se limiter à un cheminement à sens unique : immigrés et natifs, Français et Chinois, peuvent apprendre les uns des autres. Les pratiques transnationales, que notre législation tend à ignorer, voire à combattre, ne sont pas un obstacle majeur à l'intégration mais une de ses facettes inévitables dans un monde globalisé. À mesure qu'elle s'est développée, les effets de la crise sanitaire ont évolué. Dans un premier temps, elle tendait à séparer les populations, mais, à plus long terme, les a rapprochées. Est-ce là une vision trop optimiste ? C'est en tout cas le parti résolument adopté par Simeng Wang et son équipe. Il se justifie amplement par les résultats obtenus.

Le lecteur qui savait peu de choses de la diaspora chinoise en France (comme c'est mon cas) en sait désormais beaucoup plus. Et il se prend à rêver. Pouvait-on étendre ce type d'enquête à d'autres courants migratoires, à d'autres diasporas ? Des enquêtes générales représentatives ont été menées sur la France entière, qui sont encore en cours d'exploitation, comme la vaste enquête longitudinale EpiCov, financée principalement par l'Inserm et menée conjointement avec l'Insee. Elles fournissent une toile de fond indispensable à l'analyse des effets de la pandémie sur les populations de la France. Mais ces enquêtes générales ne dispensent aucunement de mener des monographies concentrant le maximum de connaissances sur une diaspora particulière. C'est tout le mérite du projet mené à bien par Simeng Wang et son équipe.

*François Héran*

Collège de France, Paris, 2023

The day after the epidemic broke out in Wuhan, Chinese people in France are already busy sending masks across borders and sharing media information; at the same time, a significant number of Chinese people are victims of racist attacks, insults and discrimination in France. Based on both quantitative and qualitative empirical data, this book reveals the new dynamics and interactions generated by the Covid-19 pandemic not only between different sub-groups of Chinese in France, but also between ethnic Chinese and their both countries: China and France. Mutual aid, local or transnational solidarity, inclusion initiatives, like any act of exclusion and hostility, invite you to question the essence of humanity in transnational settings, beyond the racialization of the Covid-19 virus.

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