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

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Chinese in France amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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

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

Simeng Wang, Francesco Madrisotti and Xiabing Chen

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 immunostimulatory¹ and antiviral properties, including licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra* L.), garlic (*Allium*

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.² 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.³

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.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2021

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.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

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.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

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.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, APRIL 2021

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.⁴

4 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

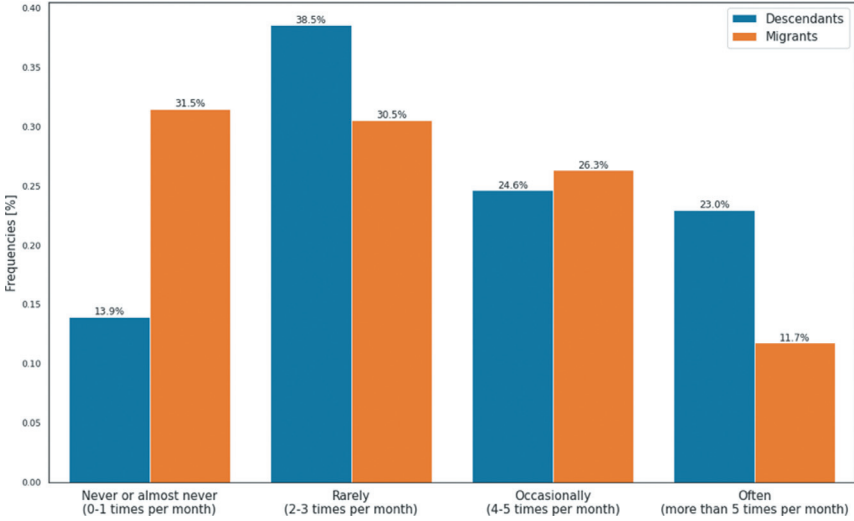


FIGURE 4.1 Frequency of dining at Asian restaurants before the pandemic

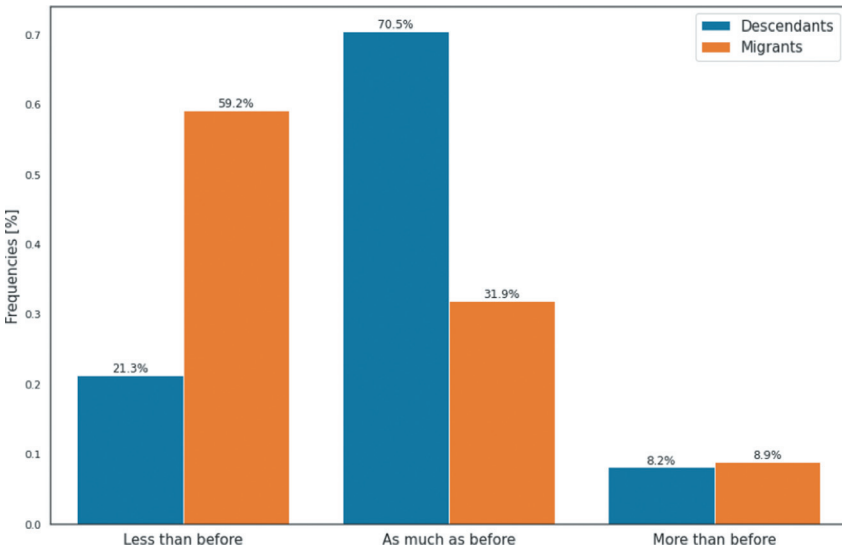


FIGURE 4.2 Evolution in the frequency of dining at Asian restaurants since the Covid-19 pandemic (January–mid-March 2020)

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]

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

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.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

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

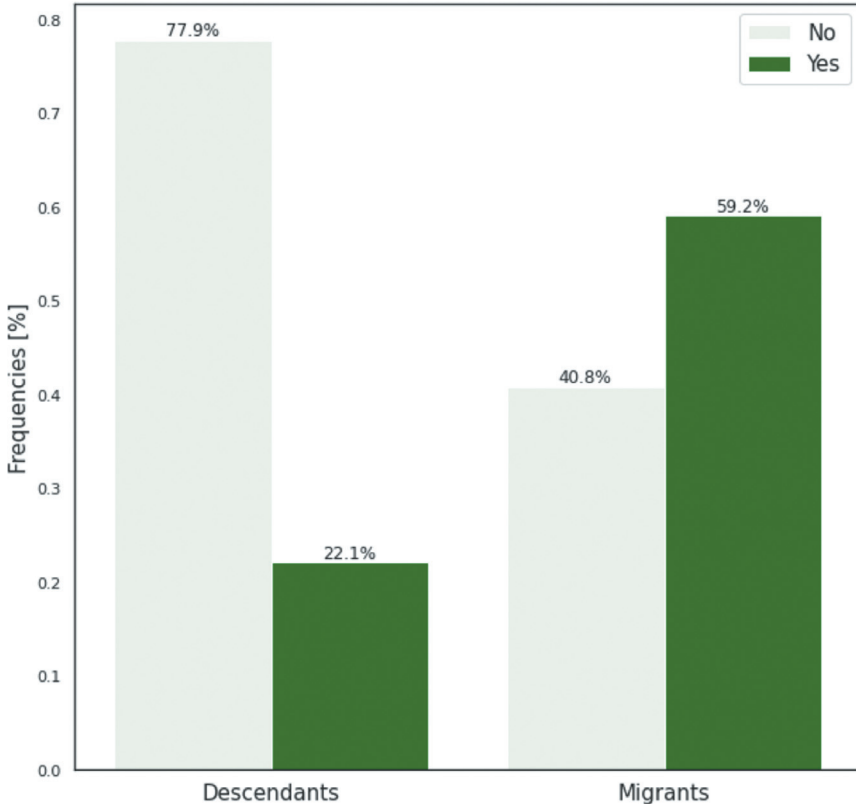


FIGURE 4.3 Did you order Asian cuisine online during the first national lockdown?

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.

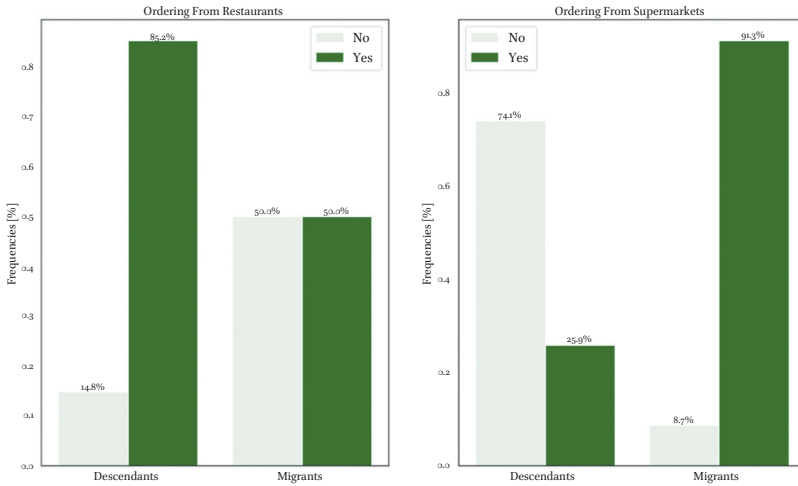


FIGURE 4.4 Online orders from Asian restaurants and supermarkets

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.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

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.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, APRIL 2021

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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