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

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*

Jun JING

*Postface by*

François HÉRAN

*With contributions from*

Francesco MADRISOTTI, Yong LI, Xiabing CHEN, Ran YAN



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*Jun Jing*

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# 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

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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,

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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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