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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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Chinese in France amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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

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Survival during the Pandemic and Coping with Risk: an Ethnography of Vulnerable Chinese Migrants Receiving Food Assistance

Francesco Madrisotti, Ran Yan and Simeng Wang

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), Tarrius (2000, 2002, 2015a, 2015b), and Tarrius 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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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