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# Capitalizing on Opportunities during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Business Transitions among Chinese Entrepreneurs in France

Simeng Wang, Xiabing Chen

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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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# Capitalizing on Opportunities during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Business Transitions among Chinese Entrepreneurs in France

*Simeng Wang and Xiabing Chen*

## Abstract

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

## Keywords

business transitions – entrepreneurs – Chinese migrants in France – Covid-19 pandemic – business patterns – commercial practices – coping strategies – digital business – economy – social engagement

This chapter uses Chinese entrepreneurs in France as an example with which to analyze the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on business transitions.<sup>1</sup> First, we review the history of the development of Chinese entrepreneurs in France and summarize the Chinese business environment among those with different social backgrounds over the past century, until the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereafter, we present case studies on business transitions among Chinese entrepreneurs in France in five different economic activities (imports and exports, catering, hotels, supermarkets, and tobacco) during the pandemic. For each industry, we explore the challenges they faced, the strategies they adopted, and what enabled these entrepreneurs to transition their business. Finally, in the conclusion, we summarize their strategies for overcoming these challenges, the key elements that enabled these entrepreneurs to make changes, and the two unprecedented business opportunities that have emerged.

This chapter uses both first-hand and secondary qualitative data collected through three main research methods. First, we conducted semistructured interviews with eighteen Chinese entrepreneurs in different areas: hotels, medicine, imports and exports, catering, retail, and tobacco. Their businesses are mainly concentrated in eastern Paris, especially the fourth, tenth, thirteenth and twentieth arrondissements, and in Aubervilliers, which is a northern suburb of Paris. Four respondents and their stores are located in Marseille, in the downtown area and in the Marseille International Fashion Center (MIF68). Four of the interviewees either have served or are currently serving as president of their industry association or in entrepreneurial communities in their home country. All eighteen interviewees are first-generation immigrants: several are skilled newcomers working in the catering and tobacco industries, and others have children who are also involved in the management of their businesses. Second, in order to fully understand their professional activities and work environments, we conducted participatory observations at their workplace. Third, we monitored media in three languages (Chinese, French, and English) on topics related to Chinese entrepreneurs in France dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this chapter was published in the *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 17(2) (2021).

## 1 A Historical Review of Chinese Entrepreneurship in France

The large number of papers that discuss immigrants' entrepreneurial identities and their entrepreneurial trajectories (Nazareno et al., 2019) since 2000 provides the theoretical basis for this chapter. Although these reviews are based mainly on cases in the United States and other English-speaking countries, comparing these studies with Chinese entrepreneurs in France helps us identify the differences and commonalities in the characteristics of identity and entrepreneurship among immigrant entrepreneurial groups.

The history of the first large-scale arrival of Chinese in France traces back to World War I, when more than 140,000 laborers from China went to Europe. After the war, about 5,000 to 7,000 people remained in France (Condliffe, 1927). During the same period, workers and artisans from Qingtian, Zhejiang Province, gathered near the Lyon train station in the twelfth arrondissement in Paris, mainly selling handmade goods (Live, 1992). At the time, Chinese businesspeople had limited interactions with the host society because of the language, the type of work, and living conditions. Like the early Asian immigrants in the US, they "were not connected to the social structures of the communities where their businesses were located" (Min, 1996). In the 1930s, many Chinese restaurants opened on the left bank of the Seine in Paris. Since the 1960s, Chinese businesspeople have established Chinese-style furniture and supplies maintenance, import and export, and retail businesses in the eleventh and twelfth arrondissements in Paris.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, another significant wave of Chinese migration went to France, which consisted mainly of members of the Chinese diaspora that left Southeast Asia because of political factors and wars. These immigrants developed a particular identity because their Chinese ancestors lived in Southeast Asia for several generations yet maintained their Chinese identity over generations of living overseas (Wang, 2007). In France, these immigrants established a community in the thirteenth arrondissement in Paris (Hassoun & Tan, 1986). The businesses frequented daily by the Southeast Asian Chinese community—such as supermarkets, restaurants, food and porcelain wholesalers, low-cost hair stylists, and insurance companies—formed a closely coordinated intraethnic economic ecosystem. These entrepreneurial structures also created employment opportunities for the ethnic group. Chinese businesspeople became integrated into the mainstream market as well, operating garment factories at low cost and providing sources for local wholesale clothing in France.

At the same time, businesses operated by entrepreneurs from Wenzhou (Zhejiang province) also boomed, from small-scale family workshops, notably



the “three knives” (cooking, hair dressing, and tailoring) to a large-scale import and export trade industry, including international production and sales chains connecting China and France. The four major Chinese districts in Paris in the 1980s were the thirteenth arrondissement, the nineteenth from Belleville to Crimée, the eighteenth near the border of the nineteenth, and the third around Arts-et-Métiers (Hassoun & Tan, 1986). Beginning in the 1970s, the immigration trajectories and experiences of Franco-Chinese businesspeople were more or less similar to their compatriots in other European countries. During the Chinese economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s, Chinese people saw Europe as a land of opportunity (Ceccagno, 2003). Consequently, a large number of less-educated and less-skilled Chinese immigrants quickly became wealthy in Western and developed countries.

Despite the huge differences among the Chinese immigrants living in different neighborhoods, their common language or family and ethnic relations helped create links among them. Through this network, Chinese businesspeople developed the characteristics of an “enclave economy” (Zhou, 2004). In terms of financing channels, Wenzhou and Chaozhou people used *qi hui* to raise funds in the early stages of business and had particular relationships within the ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> Small investment gatherings were held within the regional group. Similar to situations that one might find in Los Angeles or Singapore, using this system, Chinese entrepreneurs who did not have access to bank loans in foreign countries could start a business by relying on trust and reputation (Long, 1998). Wenzhou businesspeople in France, extensively studied by Wang Chunguang (2017), have experienced generational changes, and their business philosophy, strategies, and attitudes were constantly updated and adjusted. As observed in America, this shows that, as a whole, Chinese businesspeople continue to develop in the direction of the urban middle class. The theoretical analysis based on the “middleman” and “enclave economy” (Light et al., 1994) is no longer sufficient for describing the subsequent development of Chinese business in France.

From the 1990s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new Chinese immigration flow emerged. These immigrants were actively engaged in commodity exports and established small businesses. Unlike previous immigrants, they often arrived in France with the funds necessary for their establishment

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2 *Qi hui* enable them to raise funds and to hold small investment gatherings through community-based relationship circles, usually within clan or kinship circles. In the absence of bank loans in a foreign country, this is a basic way for Chinese people to do business in France, relying on trust. It is similar to what is called *piaohui* in Singapore or *yuelanhui* in certain regions in mainland China (Wang C., 2017).

and actively participated in China's distribution chain as a "world factory" (Ma Mung, 2009). In the 1990s, an increasing number of Chinese businesspeople from Zhejiang and Guangdong Provinces initiated entrepreneurial associations. These associations have integrated the capabilities of Chinese business clusters and played an important role in the international trade production and sales chain (Li, 2002).

In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization, which created more potential for overseas Chinese businesspeople to purchase goods from China and enabled Chinese entrepreneurship to become more global than ever before (Li, 2021). Transnationalism has become an important feature of international entrepreneurship, whether through individual immigration, the diaspora community, or multilateral government organizations (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2004; Portes et al., 2002; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2015). For example, because of the progress of globalization, Sino-Italian entrepreneurs gradually began to participate in various economic activities in the international industrial division of labor, such as manufacturing (Ceccagno, 2015).

By the turn of the millennium, hundreds of Chinese import wholesalers had taken root in the third and eleventh arrondissements in Paris. They traded wholesale goods, such as jewelry, leather bags, and children's and ready-to-wear clothing, with nearly 700 wholesalers on the three main streets in the residential area of the eleventh arrondissement. This phenomenon of rapid development was mainly due to the tendency toward getting together quickly by family or acquaintance networks within an ethnic group and characterized by a high rate of Chinese employees (Spener & Bean, 1999). In 2003, local residents in the eleventh arrondissement began to complain to the government about the singular business model of Chinese businesspeople; as a result of this model, other businesses, such as restaurants and supermarkets, could no longer easily enter the market. At the same time, the municipal government of Aubervilliers, a city with large-scale storage facilities, opened its doors to Chinese businesspeople. Drawn to the ample space, lax policies, and convenient logistics and transportation, Chinese businesspeople who were originally located in the center of Paris gradually relocated to Aubervilliers. In 2015, according to the mayor at that time, Pascal Beaudet, the arrival of the first Chinese wholesalers in Aubervilliers in the 2000s "gradually snowballed," and the city had 1,200 Chinese traders and became the leading commercial hub between the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

The migration paths of Chinese entrepreneurs going to France vary in relation to the geographic area where they landed. Moreover, these migration paths

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3 <https://fr.fashionnetwork.com/news/Aubervilliers-quartier-general-du-vetement-chinois,478562.html>.

can be very complex, in particular for migrants settling in big cities, such as Paris and Marseille. In addition to the Chinese entrepreneurs who immigrated directly from mainland China or other Asian regions, there are also those who arrived in France from southern European countries, such as Italy and Spain. After they settled in France, their migratory paths had a huge impact on their business activities and models. We draw a distinction between business activities carried out by Chinese entrepreneurs in northern France—in particular in Paris and the Île-de-France region—and those conducted by Chinese businesspeople in southern France, such as Marseille. In Paris, the Chinese entrepreneurs mainly buy the goods directly from China and sell them in northern France and beyond, in central and northern Europe. However, the Chinese businesspeople in Marseille maintain strong ties with southern Europe. In the import-export trade, they mainly purchase goods from Prato, in Italy, and sell not only to central and southern France but also to North Africa. The business migration experience of Chinese merchants and their geographic location after migration created different supply and marketing networks and market structures.

Since 2010, with the rapid increase in the number of students going to France and the growth of other highly skilled immigrant groups, Chinese immigration to France entered a new stage (Wang, 2020) in which the profiles and occupations of the Chinese in France became increasingly diverse. Their places of residence and employment also extended beyond the Chinese neighborhoods mentioned earlier. After graduating from college, some international students entered the mainstream labor market, and others started their own businesses. This new generation of entrepreneurs with high academic qualifications differs from the Wenzhou and Southeast Asian businesspeople who devoted themselves to traditional businesses. At the early stages of entrepreneurship, this highly skilled group of immigrants focused on emerging industries, such as the internet, and did their best to integrate the electronic business model into traditional industries, such as developing electronic platforms for ordering and delivery, developing programs for purchasing discounted goods online, contributing to the customized tour service industry (Li, 2019), purchasing luxury goods or goods for mothers and children for domestic consumers (Wang S., 2017), and opening Chinese schools and parent and child classes. At the same time, they mostly abandoned the saturated inward-looking ethnic economic industry and, instead, target mainstream French markets and even global customers.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, some Chinese entrepreneurs, notably those who are highly educated, had already made or partially made a business transition to “click-and-mortar businesses,” “hiring beyond Chinese ethnic networks,”

and “paying attention to the living country’s policy directions.” These transitions significantly helped to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic. In the following section, we analyze business transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic among Chinese entrepreneurs in France across five industries.

## 2 Chinese Business Transitions during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Challenges, Strategies, and Keys to Success

From the end of February to mid-March in 2020, before the French government issued the lockdown order, many Chinese businesspeople in France had already slowed down their economic activities because of the outbreak in China, which occurred earlier. After the implementation of the national lockdown in mid-March 2020, Chinese-run traditional wholesale and retail businesses and catering services were almost completely suspended. Very few could continue to work during the lockdown period. After the lockdown ended in mid-May, many companies with factories in China were affected by factors such as the shrinking market and a reduction in flights, and their businesses stagnated.

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for businesspeople but has also provided an opportunity for them to innovate and change. Our empirical research shows that the Covid-19 pandemic might not be the direct cause of business transitions but, rather, creates unique conditions that facilitate this transition. It has stimulated and catalyzed business transitions in the Chinese diaspora in France. Below we analyze typical cases in five different industries.

### 3 Import and Export Wholesale Industry: the Big Shuffle Catalyzed by the Pandemic

#### 3.1 *Historical Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic and Recent Challenges during the Pandemic*

After the national lockdown in France was lifted on May 11, the wholesale traders in the Chinese Import and Export Wholesale City in Aubervilliers generally resumed operations. Their target customer base is very diverse, including merchandisers in Paris and neighboring French provinces as well as other European countries. The Chinese Import and Export Wholesale City in Aubervilliers has some characteristics of an “enclave economy.”

The optical shop operated by Mr. Xia, whom we interviewed at the end of July, is located in Aubervilliers. Compared to the ready-to-wear clothing, groceries, accessories, and luggage sold by other Chinese entrepreneurs, the glasses sold by Xia are relatively high-tech products. In his words, “the barriers to entry [in this market] are relatively high, and technology and products are not easily copied. There is depth and breadth.” Xia, who was born in Wenzhou, went to France in 1987 and founded this import and export company in 1992. It currently has eighteen employees, and, although it is now run by his daughter, Xia still goes to the shop every day and plays a significant advisory role.

Xia commented on the historical changes in the import and export wholesale industry:

Beginning in 2000, when China joined the World Trade Organization, no matter who came [to the Chinese import and export wholesale business circle in Aubervilliers], there was a shop that had what they were looking for. It was so easy to do business. ... It can be said that the period from 2000 to 2020 was the most glorious time for overseas Chinese to do business abroad. ... I believe that since 2010 ... , more stores have gone out of business, and fewer have [opened a business].

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

These scenarios describe a change in the trends in import and export industries in this region during the process of globalization. At the beginning, these industries had an extremely high number of characteristics of an enclave economy, and the rate of Chinese employees at enterprises was very high. At this early stage, wholesalers were all beneficiaries, but as the cluster effect reached its apex, internal competition appeared in the import and export market. This prompted entrepreneurs such as Xia to choose higher value-added industries and offer professional services.

Although Xia is still in imports and exports, he is not optimistic about the future of this sector, which he sees as largely weakened by the Covid-19 pandemic. He said that “the overall conditions in wholesale business circles continue to decline, but it has not yet reached the bottom. This [wholesale] business district market has shrunk and expanded. It is now 1,500 businesses, and it may become 1,000 or even 500 in the future.” This situation also threatens Xia’s business.

Chinese traders engaged in the import-export trade in Marseille have undergone a process of relocation similar to that in the Paris region. Many who were formerly based in the center of Marseille moved to Marseille International

Fashion Center (MIF68), an import/export trade center the suburbs built specifically for Chinese traders to facilitate their unloading of goods, storage, and access. When the business environment improved significantly, so did their business, but the sudden outbreak of the pandemic brought the flourishing business to a halt. During our interviews with them in Marseille, Chinese traders told us that, despite receiving some financial subsidies from the French government, they had difficulties, particularly because of the high rents and the loss of customers to the site.

### 3.2 *What Strategies Have Been Employed in Response to These Challenges?*

#### 3.2.1 Capacity of “Made in France” and Further Integration of the Ethnic Economy into the Mainstream

As Xia described, “Now we can acquire some local companies, because the price of assets has fallen. Chinese people can actually do this now; it is an opportunity. I am also thinking about whether to set up a factory that produces glasses here.” The objective of this strategy is to combine his own capital with French production capacities and encourage second-generation immigrants to participate in the management of enterprises in a way that embeds their high value and professional service businesses in French society.

#### 3.2.2 Building a Global Strategy

Xia stated that “every enterprise needs to have a brand and a sales network. Even if one buys a local business, one has to package and transform it into an international company.” He hopes to find suppliers for his business outside China, in Vietnam or India. In France, descendants of Chinese entrepreneurs, such as his daughter, are actively developing China’s high-end consumer market, trying to create brands and products that are “Made in France,” and then selling them to China (Wang, 2019). The children of business people like Xia grow up in a Chinese entrepreneurial cultural environment but, at the same time, are educated and learning skills in France, therefore, they are uniquely equipped to play an intermediary role in transnational trade that link the home country of their parents (China) and the country of their birth (France). This is echoed in the research results from studies carried out in other European countries (Thunø & Li, 2020). These descendants have a multilingual and multicultural educational background and therefore have more opportunities to manage transnational markets between China and Hungary (Nyiri, 2014). Similarly, because they are better integrated into local society and well educated, descendants of Chinese migrants in Portugal have the

skills to consider finance or other services, such as platform economies, when choosing a career, instead of simply working in their parents' industries (Gaspar, 2019).

### 3.2.3 Exploring the Online Economy

The wholesalers at MIF68 in Marseille have been actively seeking solutions to the problems they face: high rent and a lack of customers. The online platform offers them a new way out. Some of them are joining forces to set up online shops. For example, one of the shopkeepers at MIF 68 said that he joined up with two other shopkeepers to open an online store to sell goods initially sold in three offline shops in the shopping center. Thereby, they could focus their efforts and skills to reduce the cost and energy of investing in e-commerce.

### 3.3 *What Enables Businesses to Shift Business Patterns and Commercial Practices?*

Xia and his daughter need to not only investigate the local market more deeply and integrate into the mainstream French economy but also pay attention to issues such as the productivity level of different production areas in the world and the purchasing power in different markets. Chinese businesspeople have a natural advantage in understanding China's international trade policies and also have an opportunity to use future international trade cooperation (e.g., Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or RCEP, China-EU negotiations on investment) to achieve their own industrial upgrades. Xia would need to use his perspective as a vantage point from which to observe the dynamics of the entire industry, as well as increase his understanding of the relevant markets in France and in China.

Because the products traded by Xia are high tech—unlike other classic import-export products, such as clothing, shoes, variety stores, and bags—and his daughter is highly educated and trilingual (in French, Chinese, and English), the Xia family business can continuously interact with its network and country in a transnational society, while taking part in the socioeconomic and political environment in both the home country and the living country. In this sense, by achieving “simultaneous embeddedness” (You & Zhou, 2019), the Xia family business can withstand the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, as shown by Portuguese Castro and Gómez Zermelo (2020), the entrepreneur's personal characteristics, the relationship with the institution, and the human resources and business strategies available to the entrepreneur affect the company's resilience.

## 4 The Catering Industry: the General Trend in Online Operations Catalyzed by the Covid-19 Pandemic

### 4.1 *Historical Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic and Recent Challenges during the Pandemic*

The Chinese in Paris have very heterogeneous migratory trajectories, which affect their economic activities. For a long time, the Southeast Asian Chinese restaurant owners in the Thirteenth Arrondissement mainly served their own community. The Wenzhou Chinese businesspeople in the third arrondissement, who were themselves economic migrants (Hassoun & Tan, 1986), often catered to relatively poor immigrant communities in the early days. More recently, with an increase in new and highly skilled immigrants as well as second-generation Chinese immigrants, who have grown up in France, restaurant owners overall are better educated, and their understanding of the catering industry and ambitions for the market have changed.

The complex nature of the catering industry is largely manifested in the tight integration of the upstream and downstream segments. From raw materials to finished products to sales, it has higher requirements for freshness than other industries. Because of globalization and expansion by Chinese entrepreneurs into the mainstream market, small and family-style Chinese restaurants gradually merged into a link in the food-industry chain. Regardless of the type of restaurant, it can find suitable and timely suppliers in the food market, thanks to a tradition of intraethnic cooperation among Chinese businesspeople. As Xue, the owner of a well-known Chinese restaurant in Paris, said, "I am from Shandong. Most of my suppliers are overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and I also do [business] with many businesspeople from Wenzhou." The catering industry is more transnational than ever before.

However, at the beginning of the outbreak in France, many food retailers rushed to buy ingredients, which caused short-term headaches for wholesalers and shocks that were felt along the entire supply chain. Xue said, "For example, the price of rice in Chinese supermarkets increased, and my suppliers are all Chinese supermarkets based in France." Nevertheless, thanks to the globalization of the food supply chain, the soaring prices caused by this short-term concentrated rush were quickly alleviated, and the air transportation of particular ingredients also returned to normal much more quickly than did the flow of people, thus allowing the Chinese catering industry as a whole to avoid a shortage of raw materials.

Moreover, as the catering industry developed, it has gradually diversified from the low-end market, ranging from those with Michelin stars to midmarket



restaurants, and a single Chinese owner might have several restaurants, which cater to different groups of customers. Additionally, highly skilled young immigrants have created an online platform for ordering food in France. If this is an example of the integration of the catering industry into the global industry chain, it is also an example of business cooperation between overseas Chinese from different regions and backgrounds. Driven by the wave of digitization in business over the past decade, the Chinese catering industry in France and upstream and downstream companies have gradually created different business formats with online platforms. China has nearly two decades of experience in building online platforms, and the food delivery industry has also developed for nearly ten years. For a long time, Chinese businesspeople in Paris were relatively inexperienced in this online field. A group of skilled young migrants spotted this market for ordering food online and created the platform Waysia (ex *Alors-faim*) in 2017, which directly promoted brick-and-mortar restaurants of all sizes to Chinese and overseas Chinese through digital marketing. It encompasses the entire supply chain: supplies, restaurant launches, and delivery of final products.

The Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly the catalyst of this digital trend and popularized Waysia among many other restaurant owners. Li, the manager of Waysia, told us, “Before the pandemic, our daily order volume was about 100 orders. Now, this has probably increased by five or six times.” Because online platforms have a large amount of industry data and provide a basis for reliable information in in-depth cooperation in the post-pandemic era, Li is convinced that this online platform could spread to the mainstream French market, introducing more authentic Chinese food to French customers and exceeding national and cultural boundaries.

## 4.2 *Strategies in Response to Challenges*

### 4.2.1 Cooperating with Online Platform and Logistics Companies

Before the pandemic, the cross-format cooperation between restaurants and online sales platforms was weak; this can be attributed to the relatively high service cost of the platforms and the fact that French customers generally prefer to consume food in restaurants. However, this collaboration improved during the pandemic. Although these intermediary platforms still have service costs, they expanded the French market’s understanding of Chinese food, beyond Chinese ethnic boundaries.

The pandemic has had a great impact on the restaurant business, in terms of business models and targeted clientele, not only in Paris but also in Marseille. Before the pandemic, restaurants located in downtown Marseille targeted groups of Chinese tourists and offered packaged prepared meals. During the

pandemic, international tourism and tourism in general were highly affected, so these Chinese restaurateurs had to make choices in order to broaden their customer base. For example, some Chinese caterers, who are very concerned about the presentation of their dishes, did not originally want to sell food to go. However, because of the lockdown restrictions, they had to start operating online. By collaborating with several delivery companies, they gained more local French customers. Some caterers wonder whether they will continue with the takeout business model after the pandemic ends. The interviewees expressed doubts about these new business models. We analyze the reluctance of restaurateurs to sell online below.

Ms. Lang, a highly skilled migrant, is the owner of a Chinese teashop. She opened it in the 2000s, when, as she says, “new opportunities were possible for Chinese business owners. ... China had just joined the World Trade Organization, which changed how Chinese culture was perceived in France and gave us more legitimacy in certain fields.” She spent a lot of time traveling to major tea-producing regions in China. Because of the active development of transnational commercial cooperation, she selected the most suitable high-quality tea for the French market and entered the French market for mid- to high-end tea. Her business scope extended beyond Paris and France, now covering all of Europe. She also established partnerships with French luxury-goods companies. During the pandemic, online sales became an important part of her business. She was actively engaged in online sales before the Covid-19 pandemic and had diverse sales channels. She also worked with the French post office, which remained open during the lockdown, so that her products could be delivered to customers’ homes smoothly.

#### 4.2.2 Playing the “Good for Your Health” Card

Ms. Lang markets tea as a product that is beneficial for overall health. During the pandemic, she experienced an unexpected surge in sales. Ms. Lang said, “Many of our customers come to the store and say that they can’t drink one liter of wine or coffee when they are locked down at home, but they drink a lot of tea. ... Most of the people who buy my tea are health conscious. Many customers say they have to buy more of our tea.”

#### 4.2.3 Maintaining a Solid Partnership with Chinese Providers in China

The trusting relationship and friendship established by Ms. Lang with Chinese tea farmers and merchants played a key role in managing exceptionally challenging international logistics during the pandemic. She recalled, “Although it was difficult this year, our solid partnership with Chinese tea farmers allowed me to receive the new supply of spring tea this year, in May. I was very worried

that I wouldn't get fresh tea this year because of Covid-19." Of course, in addition to this well-founded and well-maintained partnership with tea farmers, this successful supply is also due to the fact that in China the pandemic was largely brought under control in April and May, and tea farmers were able to work and send sufficient supplies abroad.

#### 4.3 *What Enables Businesses to Overcome the Challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic?*

We conclude that, under normal circumstances, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese catering industry in France was already undergoing a business transition, particularly through the efficient combination of online platforms and offline services. The pandemic accelerated this business transition. China has a wealth of experience in areas such as network platform operations, and these technologies and digital supplies enabled Chinese businesspeople to experiment with digital business in the catering sector in France.

Moreover, Chinese entrepreneurs in catering gradually expanded their customer base and developed a wider market, targeting not only Chinese customers but also non-Chinese Europeans. This second business pattern shift enabled these entrepreneurs to mitigate the loss of turnover linked to onsite consumption during the pandemic. Finally, the deeply rooted transnational links between these entrepreneurs and Chinese producers in China ensured a steady supply and commercial chain even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As described by Korede et al. (2021), during the Covid-19 pandemic, ethnic minority restaurant owners in the UK adopted diverse innovative practices in order to survive, and second-generation ethnic minority business owners are more likely to experiment with innovative behaviors. All these innovative behaviors lead entrepreneurs to change their business models, making it easier to create value from their economic activities (Cucculelli & Bettinelli, 2015; George & Bock, 2011).

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

However, not all restaurant owners are willing to use online ordering services out of a belief that the complex cooking procedures and final presentation of Chinese cuisine are often "devalued" by the procedures involved in delivery.

A restaurant owner in Paris told us,

I didn't do takeout before, because I was doing good business, because I thought it would be bad if I took the best food home, and then after I closed the door at lockdown, a lot of people told me I had to do take out because I was alone, and I had to find someone to do it. It was fine, but I

had to find someone to do it. During the pandemic, the workers weren't necessarily happy to cook, so they didn't want to take the risk, so at first, I didn't want to do takeout, but later on, a lot of customers called me and said I had to do takeout, they wanted to eat our meal, so I had no choice. Then I participated in an online platform to deliver, but it's still very different from what is usually done, I do steamed buns, those who can send the whole lot out, try not to do sautéed meals, especially, for example, northern dishes, such as Lu cuisine, you can enjoy it on the spot, it's very good, but you cannot enjoy after the long wait due to delivery.

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This is not an isolated case, as the owner of another Chinese restaurant in Marseille expressed similar doubts:

This is really the time of the pandemic, we did not do this packaging when we closed the city; we said a long time ago that Deliveroo, UberEat, and JustEat all had contact with us a long time ago, but I refused; a journalist asked me how I saw the packaging, so I said I do not do packaging, and the journalist asked me why not. I said that I reject this commercial packaging behavior, but now I decided to compromise, I have no choice, we also have to survive, but in fact, I am really rejecting this commercial behavior, because I am Cantonese: we like to eat, the pursuit of taste is still very high, we still hope that guests can really eat the original stir-fry with taste, but there is too much uncertainty in the packaging process. So that this expectation is not achieved. But I am also very grateful to these customers, many French customers, I thank them for their understanding, they are very tolerant to accept this packaging, yes, in fact, I really thank them.

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## 5 Chinese Supermarkets: Different Sizes, Different Challenges and Strategies

### 5.1 *Historical Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic*

Today, many smaller Chinese supermarkets, such as Chen Market, still target the local ethnic community. Others, such as 37 Express, have gradually developed into midsize stores or even large supermarket chains, such as the Paris Store, which has more than twenty-two branches in major cities across the country and more than seven hundred employees. These supermarkets coexist without a fiercely competitive relationship because they target different

customers. Many Chinese supermarkets have a considerable proportion of local French customers in addition to their local Chinese customers—in other words, they have become integrated into French society.

### 5.2 *Challenges during the Pandemic Crisis and Corresponding Strategies and Solutions*

The three supermarkets we studied face different challenges posed by Covid-19 based on their size. Accordingly, owners have adopted various corresponding solutions and strategies. The owner of Chen Market, a small supermarket, told us that the store reopened on April 12, 2020. Mr. Chen said, “Many of our customers are elderly people living in the same district. They don’t know how to use online shopping tools, but still need to meet their daily needs. Despite this health emergency, keeping our store open is our responsibility.” A week after reopening, Chen said, “70 percent of the employees are willing to return to work, mostly men. That is thanks to a good relationship maintained with my employees.”

37 Express, a midsize supermarket, had a decline in its number of customers at the beginning of the lockdown. On April 8, 2020, two weeks after it began, the company initiated an online ordering service, enabling customers to shop at home on their mobile phones and computers and get their orders delivered via the postal office. It took a week to digitize the shopping process.

Most large Chinese supermarkets, such as Paris Store, continued to operate during the pandemic though with limits on the number of customers in the store at one time, following regulations by the French Ministry of Health. All employees are equipped with masks and protective gloves. To deal with problems in supplies at the beginning of the first lockdown, the company used a local supplier. In addition, it created an online ordering service, in which customers had to go to the store to pick up their orders.

### 5.3 *What Enables Businesses to Overcome the Challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic?*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the high rate of supermarkets owned and operated by members of the Chinese community contributed to a relationship of mutual trust between employees and employers. When employers asked employees to return to work, consult with them, and are willing to negotiate, employees are mostly agreeable. When they believe that hygiene and personal protection conditions are prioritized, they feel confident about going back to work.

Second, these Chinese supermarkets stock a diverse and increasingly broad variety of goods. Their products are not only imported from other Asian

countries but also supplied locally, enabling them to withstand the negative effects of the pandemic.

Finally, online orders and delivery services became a central part of the Chinese supermarkets' business transition, which moderated the loss of customers during the pandemic.

## **6 Chinese Hotel Chains: Continuing to Operate during the Lockdown and Mobilizing Employees to Participate in the Fight against the Pandemic in France**

### **6.1 *Changes in the Industry before the Covid-19 Pandemic and Challenges during the Pandemic Crisis***

Wu graduated from Xi'an Jiaotong University, and then went to France in 1983 to pursue a PhD and completed it four years later. In 1993, he decided to start a business and, more than twenty years later, created the Hipotel Hotel chain. As the CEO, he operates 15 budget hotel chains in Paris, has 150 employees, and has more than 800 rooms, enough to accommodate 2,000 guests. The hotel industry has a lower rate of Chinese employees than the other industries run by Chinese businesses studied here. Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, this lower rate of Chinese workers is one of the key elements enabling him to continue operating his business, a point to which we return later.

Because of China's reform and opening up and continuous development of tourism as well as continued liberalization of Sino-French visa policies, globalization has given Wu a steady stream of tourists. However, the Covid-19 pandemic brought this kind of international travel flow to an abrupt halt. Wu had to replace his lost customers, in particular by developing the mainstream market in France.

### **6.2 *What Strategies Were Employed and What Enables This Business to Overcome the Challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic?***

Wu explored the mainstream market and participated in the fight against the pandemic in France. He said,

After [French President Emmanuel] Macron announced the lockdown, all the French people "disappeared" in one day, and everyone stayed home. For a while, I didn't know whether the hotel would reopen or not. ... We could choose whether to close our doors. ... Ten of them continued to operate, and the other five closed as soon as they had no business. So why did we reopen? We responded to President Macron's appeal. We

welcomed medical staff, police, state civil servants, and some social-relief organizations as well as homeless families who were at risk of contracting the virus. Also, during the lockdown period, domestic violence in France increased 36 percent, and some victims have been accommodated temporarily in our hotels. I believe that my hotel chains have made contributions to France's fight against the pandemic. If we close our doors, where will all the health-staff members, police officers, and victims of family violence stay?

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Indeed, in the absence of international travel flows, Wu made the strategic decision to turn to the development of the French market, finding new and special customers during the Covid-19 pandemic. This compensated for the temporary loss of guests. As mentioned by Ratten (2020) and Shafie and Mohd Isa (2021), the entrepreneur's keen business sense and timely business decisions are important factors in making the business resilient.

The second element of his success is the low rate of Chinese employees, which played a crucial role and enabled the hotel chains to remain open during the lockdown:

They [the Chinese employees] are more affected by what happened in China, their home country; all of them chose to stay home to protect themselves and their loved ones. They were reluctant to keep working in March, April, and even July. I can understand that. Fortunately, in my hotels, most of the employees are from other ethnic groups or local French! They kept working during the lockdown.

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Indeed, the employees of non-Chinese origin that Wu hires are less "fearful" of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the low rate of Chinese employees allowed the business to maintain normal activity during the pandemic.

All four industries previously analyzed were deeply affected by globalization, and the Chinese entrepreneurs that we interviewed are tightly linked to both China, their country of origin, and France, their country of residence. Our analysis mainly takes the theoretical perspective of "simultaneous embeddedness." However, some Chinese-dominated industries were not affected as deeply by transnational flux as these four industries. Next, we discuss an industry that plays an important role in local residential communities and was able to withstand the challenges of the pandemic and continues to attract potential Chinese business partners.

## 7 During the Epidemic, Tobacco Shops—a High-Threshold and Low-Risk Sector—Demonstrate Advantages

Tobacco retail stores, which is a high-threshold and low-risk type of enterprise, have suffered relatively little from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. France currently has 24,000 tobacco shops, and, because of a state monopoly, these businesses can operate only after obtaining French government bids by individuals or allied enterprises. In 2013, the annual report of the Federation of Tobacco Shops in the Île-de-France region showed that nearly 45 percent of tobacco shop owners in the area were members of the Asian diaspora (Le Parisien, 2014). The sale of various types of tobacco requires a license. A tobacco shop operator must have French citizenship or be a citizen of an EU member state, provide a certificate stating the absence of criminal convictions, and prove the absence of ownership share or management rights in other tobacco shops (one person can only own one tobacco shop), along with other strict procedures.

Under this strict market control, French governments rarely issue licenses, and investors who enter the market can do so only by purchasing existing stores. Tobacco shops, which are important in French culture, have continuously expanded their business scope and have become a meeting place for a wide variety of products and a constant stream of customers. Their relatively fixed profit mainly comes from commissions on tobacco and various handling fees from the state: these businesses are easy to operate, and owners can easily earn income by doing so. In this way, owners only need to sell enough tobacco stamps from the state to regular customers, even though their work intensity can be significant. After buying a business, they must undergo a short course of on-the-job training to fully understand the operations and rules in the industry. Tobacco shops in Paris and major cities are generally open twelve hours a day, six days a week.

Many tobacco shops run by the older generation of Chinese immigrants earn profits due to their hard work. Owners usually invest in the education of their children, as well as achieving social integration and experiencing a rise in social class. For example, a tobacco shop owner in Aubervilliers told us, “At the time, my main consideration was our young child, and this business was relatively stable. If I worked at other enterprises, I am afraid that I would not be able to have a stable enough income for sending my children to good schools. Now, two of my three daughters are at foreign companies, and they do not want to do our jobs.”

However, the new generation of Chinese migrants, who obtained higher education, is willing to invest in this industry. Weiwen, originally from Hangzhou, married and had children after studying in France, and then bought a tobacco and lottery shop in the western suburbs of Paris in 2002.



### 7.1 *An Industry Affected Very Little by the Covid-19 Pandemic*

During the epidemic, tobacco stores were among the few businesses allowed to continue operating. The day after the lockdown began, Weiwen opened the store as usual. Fewer customers came to the store, but business did not decrease. To reduce the chance of infection, Weiwen changed the business hours from eight hours a day to four, five days a week.

Another tobacco shop owner, Mr. Huang, is from Wenzhou and speaks fluent French. In 2004, his family sold a restaurant at the center of Paris, and he decided to buy a tobacco shop as an experiment. After the lockdown measures were implemented, Huang continued to operate for three days. Then, because of health considerations, his parents repeatedly urged him to close the store for three weeks. It was not until early April that Huang reopened his doors. He said, "When we first opened, we were only open for four to five hours and then only gradually increased. It was not until May 17 that we resumed normal business hours. It is clear that the pandemic has not reduced the demand for smoking." Huang added, "The customers are mostly of retirement age, and our guests wear masks to buy cigarettes and leave quickly afterward; their concern can be discerned in the tone of their voice." According to him, during the lockdown, turnover decreased by at least 30 percent compared with before Covid-19, but he did not lose any money.

### 7.2 *An Emerging Preferred Industry?*

The prices for selling tobacco and lottery tickets are regulated by the government, so profits are strictly controlled and lower than in other commercial sectors. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this industry experienced fewer risks and comparatively little investment and stockpiling, which makes it relatively stable. Huang said, "If you compare us with other nearby businesses, I am lucky. In France, coffee and tobacco shops represent the vitality of the city and the neighborhood and the affinity of the residents. It's one way to have contact with the outside world." The tobacco industry, considered a "stable industry," is therefore increasingly preferred for investment by the Chinese businesspeople whom we interviewed.

### 7.3 *Social Responsibility of Tobacco Store Owners*

Mr. He, who had worked as an elementary school teacher in Wenzhou, became a tobacco store owner after going to France. At the beginning of 2021, He heard from his friends that some Chinese had difficulties buying enough food because they had lost their jobs during the pandemic. This news touched him deeply, and because of that understanding, he noticed that many Chinese migrants living on the margins, and the majority of them were undocumented. Soon afterward, he contacted a former student in Wenzhou, who now runs

a G20 supermarket in Paris, to organize a campaign dedicated to supporting Chinese in need. In the spring of 2021, he organized sites for charitable food distribution for Chinese migrants living on the edge (see Chapter 8). He created a WeChat group to collect donations from more Chinese businessmen or Chinese friends and coordinated volunteers for buying food for distribution (including eggs, milk, flour, rice) through supermarket networks, organizing registration for events, and so on. More than ten distribution events were held, which served hundreds of people. Although they were designed to help people of Chinese origin and operated through WeChat, non-Chinese people in need were also welcome.

## 8 Conclusion

Over the past century, the heterogeneity of Chinese businesspeople in France has increased. This is reflected not only in the migration trajectory and social composition of Chinese businesspeople but also in the generational changes in the ethnic economy and the differentiation of the sectors in which Chinese entrepreneurs operate. Before the pandemic, some Chinese entrepreneurs had already made or partially made the transition to “integrating online and offline businesses,” “hiring beyond Chinese ethnic networks,” and “paying attention to the living country’s policy directions,” which helped them greatly reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic. Indeed, members of the current generation of young Chinese entrepreneurs are looking increasingly at local French distribution and logistics. Before the pandemic, these highly skilled Chinese migrants who migrated to France in the 2000s tried to differentiate themselves from the business models of Wenzhou, Chaozhou, and Southeast Asian Chinese merchants, who started out by importing and exporting traditional small commodities and managing specialty stores. These skilled entrepreneurs as well as their descendants looked at the mainstream economic market in France before the pandemic began, hired French employees, and sought French customers. These Chinese business practices observed over the past two decades have all gone beyond the traditional “ethnic economy” model (Ma Mung, 1994). This is similar to the general characteristics in the global migration economy summarized by Nazareno et al. (2019).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, the Chinese entrepreneurs in France who had already achieved or are striving to make business transitions have been affected by the pandemic relatively little because they already have mature digital operations, online ordering, mobile apps, and experience with delivery. This has been critical in turning crisis into opportunity during the lockdown.

Skilled newcomers and young descendants of immigrants play an important role in the digitization of businesses and in the management of multinational e-commerce. The existing Chinese business resources have a tendency to combine innovation in their entrepreneurial model with new technologies. The skilled younger generation is the main key in developing that trend.

The second important key to success is the diversity of the employees of these Chinese businesses. Our field materials clearly show that it has been much more difficult for Chinese employees to return to work than employees of other ethnic groups. In many cases, even if the Chinese business owner wanted to resume work or continue to operate during the lockdown, the reluctance of Chinese employees to return to work prevented the business from operating, except that Chinese employers and Chinese employees had already developed a strong relationship of trust. A low rate of Chinese workers, as in Wu's case, enabled continued activity in the hotel industry during the pandemic.

At the same time, the pandemic opened up two unprecedented business opportunities. The first is "fostering local production." The transnational production and operation chain was severely affected by the pandemic. This global business model of relying on production and assembly in a low labor market and sale in a high-consumption market is no longer feasible when the global logistics and passenger flow are nearly at a standstill. Because of the pandemic, France has realized the importance of "local production," especially in medical supplies and equipment. One Chinese businessman who seized this opportunity is Huang Xuesheng, who opened a mask factory in Blanc-Ménil, a northern suburb of Paris.

The second new trend that we identified in the field survey is "seeking low-risk sectors." Many Chinese businesspeople, particularly traditional import and export wholesalers of small commodities and ready-to-wear garments, began to actively seek "industries that can continue to operate even if the city is locked down again." The tobacco industry considered a "stable industry," is therefore targeted for investment by Chinese businesspeople.

In general, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the transition of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurship in France. However, the pandemic might not be the direct cause of this business transition; rather, it created unique conditions that facilitate the transition. Chinese entrepreneurship in France faces a multidimensional reshuffle of industrial structures, business methods, and transformation strategies. Being anchored in the French market, maintaining transnational ties with China, and digitizing and combining the physical industrial chain with online platforms have all become winning strategies for Chinese entrepreneurs in France to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic and successfully adapt their businesses. At the same time, industries that

satisfy basic needs performed relatively well in the pandemic. This prompted some Chinese businesspeople to begin to reflect on what constitutes a core industry in the living country.

Previous studies on Chinese overseas entrepreneurs usually focus on the structure of entrepreneurship in various industries, the ethnic relationship linking the home country to the host country, and the social integration of descendants over the long term. The significance of our research is that, relying on previous work, it explores the catalytic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Chinese entrepreneurial transition in France, over a short period and in the context of a global crisis. As the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly will continue to reverberate, this innovative empirical research on a French case could provide a model for similar studies on overseas Chinese entrepreneurs in other national settings in and beyond Europe.

Theoretically, our study suggests that business transitions among Chinese entrepreneurs in France need to be examined beyond the framework of pure economic rationality, taking into consideration the cross-border interaction between the country and the market. Chinese businesspeople are concerned about market trends and policies, as well as the business environments in both the home country and the living country. Cross-cultural, cross-system, cross-thinking, and cross-border activities in the two societies profoundly affect both globalization and changing trends in the post-pandemic era. We can use the theoretical perspective of “simultaneous embeddedness” to observe and understand the current and future major changes in the post-pandemic era.

A few final questions remain. Will the new business models studied here and adopted thus far by Chinese entrepreneurs in France stand the test of time during subsequent phases of the pandemic and afterward? What are the continuing impacts of the pandemic on the organizational forms and methods of Chinese businesspeople in various industries? What role will the next generation play in business innovation, as they take over family businesses during the pandemic? These questions demand follow-up to this empirical survey as well as continued fieldwork in the future.

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