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# Anti-Asian Racism during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences, Narratives, and Reactions

Simeng Wang, Francesco Madrisotti

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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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# Anti-Asian Racism during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Experiences, Narratives, and Reactions

*Simeng Wang and Francesco Madrisotti*

## Abstract

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

## Keywords

anti-Asian racism – Covid-19 pandemic – Chinese people in France – migrants – descendants – awareness raising – discrimination – stigmatization – mixed methodology – experiences – narratives – reactions – political engagement – fights

against racism – natural language processing (NLP) – Chinese organizations – social media – Facebook – WeChat

## 1 Introduction

At the time of its outbreak in China, Covid-19 was globally portrayed in some media as a “Chinese” virus (Sun, 2021).<sup>1</sup> This led to the racialization of the disease (Reny & Barreto, 2022), in which the virus is described as intrinsically linked to a country (China) and to the “Chinese” population. In various countries, people perceived as Chinese have been seen as carriers of the disease and therefore as a potential threat (Gao, 2021; He et al., 2020; Li & Nicholson, 2021; Roberto et al., 2020).

In this context, the acts of racism and discrimination against Chinese and, more broadly, Asian people increased worldwide (Ma & Zhan, 2022; Roberto et al., 2020). The racialization of the disease was accompanied by the activation of longstanding stigmas rooted in colonial and postcolonial history, such as representations of the Chinese population as “dirty,” “vicious” (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021; Li & Nicholson, 2021), and eternally alien. Recent forms based on a sense of political, economic, and geopolitical threat embodied by China were added to the old forms of stigmatization. At a global scale, the racialization of the disease and the activation of longstanding or more recent stigmas have fueled an “othering” process, which leads to the marginalization and social exclusion of people of Asian origin (Chang, 2021; Gao, 2022; Gover et al., 2020) and to decline in their physical and mental well-being (Cheah et al., 2020; Coffey et al., 2021; Haft & Zhou, 2021; Lou et al., 2022a, 2022b; Pan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020; Horse, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). In response, people of Chinese origin around the world have mobilized locally and transnationally, both to fight the spread of the virus and to fight anti-Asian racism (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021; Chang, 2020; Krause & Bressan, 2020; Litam & Oh, 2022; Ma & Zhan, 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

In France, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered episodes of more or less violent and explicit racism and xenophobia, ranging from distrust and avoidance to physical aggression and stigmatization in public (Wang et al., 2021, 2022). Before the pandemic, few academic papers addressed the issues of anti-Asian racism and struggles against it by the Chinese population in France, which were mainly discussed within the theoretical frameworks of “integration”

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on three articles previously published in *European Societies* (sup1) (2021), *Émulations* (2022), and *Politika* (2021).

versus “ethnic enclave” (Chuang, 2015, 2021), or of the “formation of citizen identity” among Chinese people in French society (Wang, 2022). The long absence of the Chinese and, more broadly, of Asians in the French ethnic and racial studies can be explained by a racialization and essentialization that considers them a “model minority” (Chou & Feagin, 2008) characterized by “social and professional success” (Geisser, 2010) and “upward social mobilities” (Wang, 2021). This racialization can then be seen as “benevolent,” with “positive stereotypes” and material benefits, even though they are still subjected to racialized power relations (Zhou-Thalamy, 2020).

In 2016 and 2017, demonstrations organized after the deaths of Zhang Chaolin and Liu Shaoyao showed a convergence of interests and political attitudes between highly educated migrants (students, graduates, skilled migrants) and people in the “Wenzhou networks” who had historically immigrated for economic reasons (migrants and descendants) (Wang, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Gradually, the scope of the demands by protesters changed, adding calls for “better security” in certain urban areas in a “fight against racism and discrimination” (Wang, 2019; Wang & Madrisotti, 2021). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the media attention to incidents of anti-Asian racism—partly via social networks and activist organizations—and the exacerbation of racist activities may have been a catalyst in raising awareness and fighting anti-Asian racism among descendants and first-generation migrants (Wang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

Using a mixed approach based on qualitative and quantitative data, this chapter analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the experience of anti-Asian racism by people of Chinese origin in France. We examine the disruptive nature of the pandemic in awareness of the reality of anti-Asian racism and the emergence of new attitudes and reactions to it by Chinese people in France. Moreover, we highlight the variety of positions and attitudes toward racist phenomena and the mechanisms and social conditions on which they are based.

From a methodological and epistemological point of view, we encountered both social and linguistic obstacles in our research. We conducted interviews in both French and Chinese. The use of Chinese enabled migrants to express themselves more easily in their mother tongue but produce some semantic confusion when interviewers talked about racism and discrimination. For those who grew up in China, their socialization and familiarization with the

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2 In August 2016, Zhang Chaolin 张朝林, a first-generation migrant from the Wenzhou region, was assaulted by a group of youths on a street in Aubervilliers. On March 26, 2017, Liu Shaoyao 刘少尧, who also came from Wenzhou, was killed by French police officer at his home in Paris.



subject may be lacking. On the subject of racial socialization in China, scientific publications in the social sciences are almost non-existent. The term racial socialization [*zhongzu shehuihua* 种族社会化] appears a few times in psychology, when authors introduce into Chinese the notion of “ethnic-racial socialization” put forward in studies of youth belonging, self-esteem, and achievement in the United States (Yin et al., 2010). Spoken Chinese does not clearly distinguish between mere differentiation [*qishi* 歧视] and racial discrimination [*zhongzu qishi* 种族歧视], which basically differentiates on the basis of race or ethnicity (Brinbaum et al., 2012).

Depending on their background and degree of familiarity with the issue of racism, some migrants immediately understood *qishi* as “racism”, whereas other respondents needed the interlocutors to discuss the definitions of these terms. A semantic shift can occur, for example, when a respondent uses *qishi* to refer to different forms of discrimination during the pandemic, mainly discrimination based on regional origin or travel history. Throughout the analysis of the interviews and the writing of this chapter, we discussed the most appropriate translations of the interviews conducted in Chinese, to ensure homogeneity in the categories of analysis between interviews conducted in French and in Chinese.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the section 2, we use quantitative data to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the subjective experience of racism by people of Chinese origin in France. In particular, we examine the impact of the pandemic on the experience of anti-Asian racism in three groups based by their migration experience. Our previous work (Wang et al., 2021) suggests that respondents’ migratory experience and age might have an impact on the experience of anti-Asian racism and its forms of expression. We validate this hypothesis by examining the impact of age on the subjective experience of anti-Asian racism across groups based by their migratory status.

In the section 3, by focusing our analysis on the direct quotations of the respondents and contextualizing them in their life story and social trajectory, we illustrate the various justifications and narratives of anti-Asian racism.

Then, in the section 4, we examine the forms of resistance to anti-Asian racism—individual or collective—by people of Chinese origin in France. We show that these forms of resistance are linked to how our respondents think about and express their opposition to anti-Asian racism. As example of collective resistance to anti-Asian racism, we provide a case study: the Association of Young Chinese of France [*Association des Jeunes Chinois de France*, or AJCF], one of the main organizations for people of Chinese origin actively engaged in fighting racism. Using the natural language processing (NLP) technique, we examine the evolution in the content posted on the Facebook page of the AJCF over the period 2010 (when it was created) to 2021. In particular, we analyze how the AJCF gradually appropriated the term “racism” as a tool for collective action.

## 2 The Subjective Experience of Anti-Asian Racism between January and July 2020

In this section, we study the impact of the pandemic on our respondents' subjective experience of anti-Asian racism. In particular, we explore how respondents report experiencing episodes of racism between January and July 2020. Our analysis is not based on an objective measure of the racism, rather, we examine the subjective experience of racism and the tendency to report having been the victim of racist activity. In previous studies, we found that descendants of Chinese migrants and younger people had a greater tendency to report having been victims of racist attitudes beginning in January 2020 (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Through the collected quantitative data, we further analyze how the tendency to report experiencing racist attitudes varies across groups, depending by their migration status and as function of age.

### 2.1 *Experiences with Racism since January 2020 and the Subjective Perception of Being a Victim of Racist Attacks*

In our online questionnaire, we asked respondents whether they believed that they had experienced racism or any form of discrimination since January 2020. In Table 10.1, 30 percent of the respondents reported that they had been victims of racism or discrimination in that time frame. The rate is higher among descendants (37%) than among naturalized migrants (29%) and even more evident than among nonnaturalized migrants (25%).

We also asked our respondents: "Since March, with the outbreaks of the pandemic in France, do you think that racist behavior toward people of Asian origin have: (1) Decreased, (2) Stayed the same, (3) Increased, or (4) I don't know." As Table 10.2 shows, overall 60 percent of the respondents declared that,

TABLE 10.1 The feeling of racial discrimination since January 2020 across migratory status groups

	Descendants, N = 137	Naturalized Migrants, N = 35	Nonnaturalized Migrants, N = 209	Overall, N = 381
Feeling of being discriminated against since January 2020				
I don't know	44 (32 %)	11 (31 %)	57 (27 %)	112 (29 %)
No	42 (31 %)	14 (40 %)	99 (47 %)	155 (41 %)
Yes	51 (37 %)	10 (29 %)	53 (25 %)	114 (30 %)

TABLE 10.2 The evolution of racist acts since March 2020 according to respondents in each migratory status group

	Descendants, N = 137	Naturalized Migrants, N = 35	Nonnaturalized Migrants, N = 209	Overall, N = 381
Evolution of racist acts since March 2020				
Decreased	5 (3.6 %)	0 (0 %)	12 (5.7 %)	17 (4.5 %)
I don't know	13 (9.5 %)	9 (26 %)	61 (29 %)	83 (22 %)
Increased	111 (81 %)	19 (54 %)	100 (48 %)	230 (60 %)
Stayed the same	8 (5.8 %)	7 (20 %)	36 (17 %)	51 (13 %)

according to them, racist acts against people of Asian origins had increased. Once again, this proportion is much higher among descendants (81%) than among migrants, both naturalized (54%) and nonnaturalized (48%).

Overall, almost a third of the respondents report having been victims of racism since January, and almost two-thirds believe that racist acts had increased over the same period.

These responses have two kinds of explanations: objective explanations and subjective explanations. We could argue that, in line with the literature mentioned in the introduction, that the ethnicization of the disease caused an objective increase in racist activity and aggression against people of actual or perceived Asian origin. Although only few studies have examined the objective evolution in racist behavior toward Asians, some research tried to point out the objective variations (directly or indirectly) and suggested that the coronavirus pandemic primed xenophobic reactions, especially affecting attitudes toward Chinese populations (Vachuska, 2020).

We could also argue that, subjectively, the ethnicization of the disease and the strong media coverage in official and social media of anti-Asian aggression reinforced the perception of an increase in racist attacks on people of Asian origin and enhanced the feeling of being a potential target of this kind of aggression.

In order to gain further insights and more precise information from their responses, we performed a multinomial logistic regression in which we examine the effect of migratory status, age, and sex on the probability of choosing one of the four options. In our analysis, we look at the group of descendants of migrants (people born in France) and at the modality "increased" as the reference. Figure 10.1 shows the results of the multinomial logistic regression.

The likelihood of responding “stayed the same” or “I don’t know” versus “increased” is higher for nonnaturalized migrants (respectively 4.54 and 4.39) than for descendants, and higher for naturalized migrants (respectively 4.37 and 3.28) than for descendants. Migrants, both naturalized and nonnaturalized, are more likely than descendants to respond that racist attacks on people of Chinese origin remained the same or that they do not know whether racist attacks increased.

Two main considerations emerge from these trends. On the one hand, descendants appear to be more “sensitive” to racist attacks and more likely to view attacks on people of Asian origin during the pandemic as racist attacks. On the other hand, migrants seem unsure about how to define and thus how to recognize racist acts. Indeed, descendants seem to be more likely to state that they have experienced racist attitudes and to say that anti-Asian behavior has increased since the outbreak of the pandemic.

This could result from a combination of factors. First, the descendants have better language skills in French: they understand their social environment better and perceive the most conspicuous and the subtlest verbal racist attacks on them. Second, descendants have been exposed to racism and the anti-racist

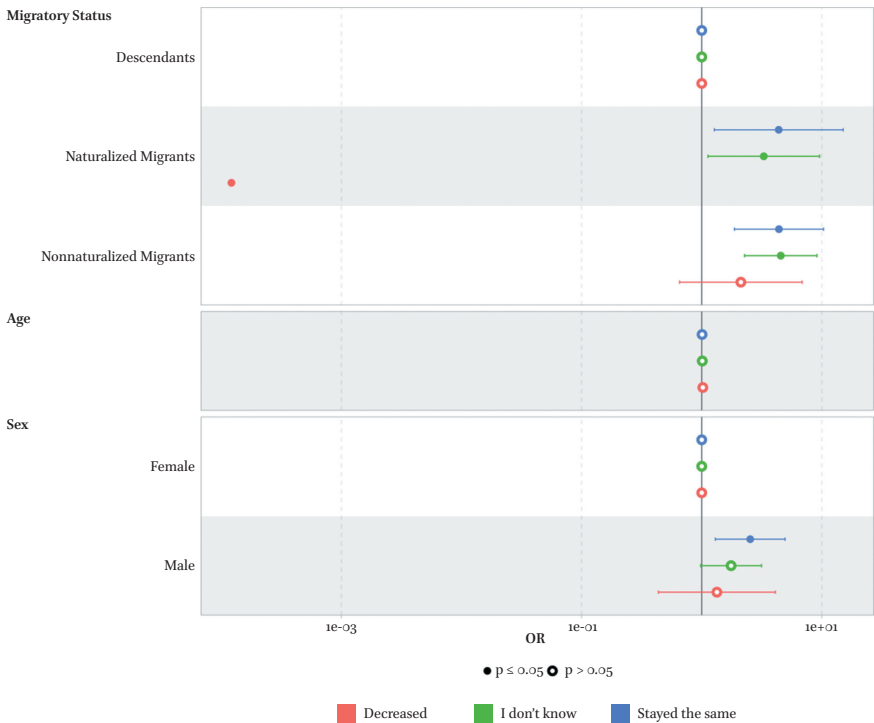


FIGURE 10.1 Regression estimates of the effects of multiple factors on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism

movement in France since their youth, and they also encountered the multiple forms of reactions to racism. But migrants, who grew up in China, have little or no exposure to racism. Moreover, migrants tend to limit their socialization to their own ethnic and national group: for this reason, they are less exposed to attacks by members of other groups. In addition, most of highly educated migrants in France are socialized in professional environments (e.g., multinational corporations or universities), in which this type of explicit attack is less frequent and is more stigmatized. In the next section, we examine the effect of these multiple factors on how our respondents think and speak about racism.

To better examine the subjective perception of having been a victim of racist behavior, we posed the following question to our respondents: During the Covid-19 pandemic, did you ever have to face any of the following situations: (1) People around me are afraid that I will infect them (yes/no), (2) People around me despise me (yes/no), (3) I have been insulted (yes/no), (4) I have been physically assaulted (yes/no), and (5) I have been deprived of certain rights: access to restaurants, bars, cafés, hotels, or other places of recreation (yes/no). Respondents could choose multiple responses. We recoded the responses to this item (no = 0 and yes = 1) and created a cumulative index that ranges from 0 to 5, where 0 indicates no experience with racist attitudes and 5 indicates experience with all the racist attitudes.

This figure 10.2 shows the respondents' experiences of racism. We note that 43% of the respondents declared that people around them are afraid

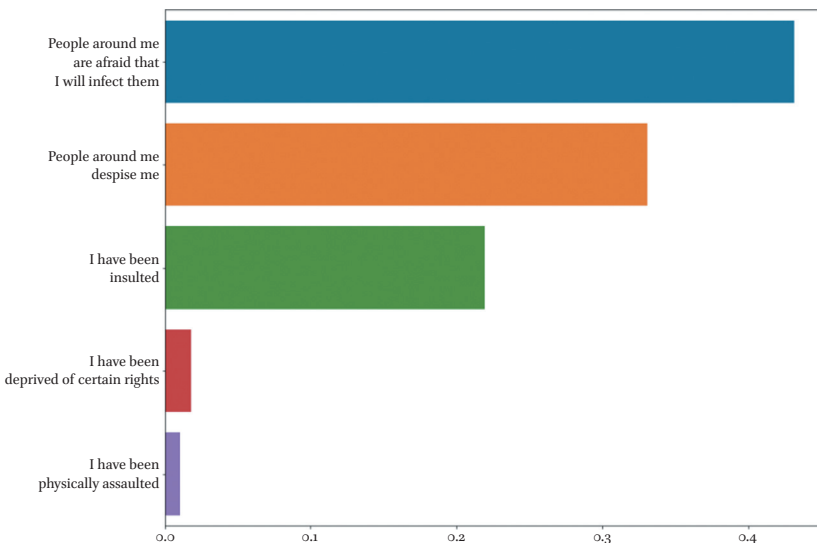


FIGURE 10.2 Experiences with racism

that they will infect them and that 33% declared that people around them despise them.

We performed a mixed regression analysis in order to examine the effect of age, sex, and migratory status on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racist behavior. We used a linear mixed-effects model, with varying intercepts and slopes, that estimates the fixed effects of migratory status, age, and sex and the random effects of age in the groups by migratory status and sex. Table 10.3 shows the results of this mixed-effects model.

Consistent with the results previously shown in Table 10.1, here table 10.3 also highlights that migrants report having been victims of racist behavior less frequently than descendants: the effect is strong among nonnaturalized migrants (-0.32, confidence interval [CI] -0.66/0.01) and naturalized migrants

TABLE 10.3 The effect of migratory status, sex, and age on opinions about the evolution of racist acts since March 2020

Predictors	Estimates	95% CI	p
Intercept	1.51	-0.30, 3.33	< 0.102
Age	1.18	-0.03, 0.00	< 0.009
Migratory status			
Nonnaturalized migrants	0.17	-0.66, 0.01	0.060
Naturalized migrants	-0.64	-0.87, 0.10	0.117
Sex			
Males	0.45		0.680
Random effects			
$\sigma^2$	0.93		
$\tau$ Migratory Status: Sex	0.01		
$\tau$ Sex	1.03		
$\tau$ Migratory Status: Sex: Age	0.00		
$\tau$ Sex: Age	0.00		
ICC	0.46		
n. Migratory Status	3		
n. Sex	2		
n. individuals	381		
Observations	381		
Marginal R-squared/Conditional R-squared	0.064/0.491		

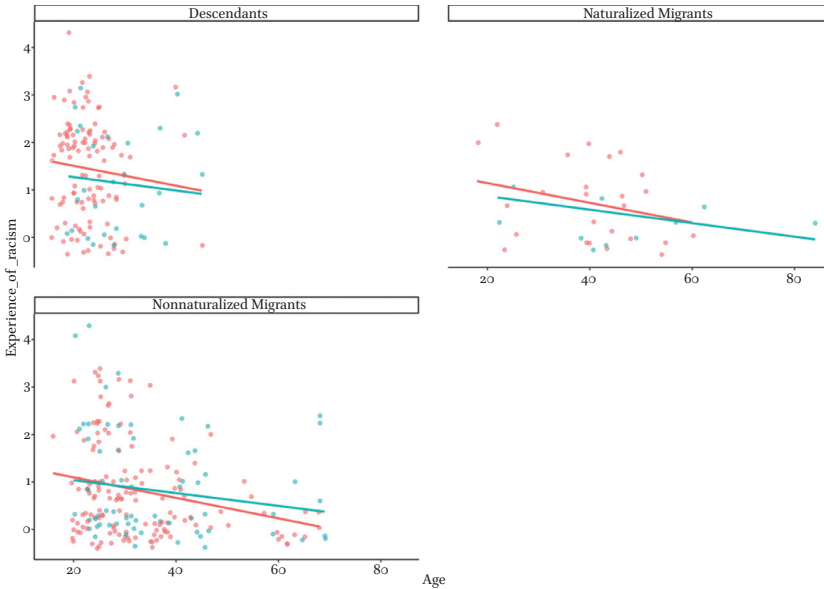


FIGURE 10.3 The effect of age on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism across migratory status groups and sex groups  
LECTURE: WOMEN ARE REPRESENTED BY THE RED DOTS AND MEN BY THE BLUE DOTS.

but, for the last group, the CIs are extremely wide ( $-0.39$ , CI  $-0.87/0.10$ ). Age has a negative effect ( $-0.02$ , CI  $-0.03/0.00$ ) on the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism: older respondents are less likely to report to have been victims of racism.

Figure 10.3 shows the effect of age in all six groups defined by migratory status and sex, estimated by the mixed-effects model: in all six groups, age decreases the subjective perception of having been a victim of racism. The regression lines show that as age increases, people decrease reporting experienced racism. This figure also reveals that descendants and women (the red dots), especially young women, have a higher perception of being victims of racist attacks.

In a nutshell, the descendants have a higher perception of being victims of racism, and, among all groups, an increase in age decreases the perception of being a victim of racism. Moreover, migrants are more likely than descendants to state that they don't know whether racist acts increased or stayed the same since March 2020.

This tendency reveals different attitudes toward and understandings of racism. We already introduced the principal factors that affect these tendencies. In the next section, we examine how these differing attitudes toward and understandings of racism surface in the discourses of interviewees.

### 3 Denial of and Narratives about Anti-Asian Racism

In this section, we examine the different ways in which racism is expressed and the different systems of justification by our respondents: in connection with the tendencies described in the previous section, we highlight different attitudes toward and understandings of racism. In particular, we study the strategies of denial and the various ways in which anti-Asian racism is expressed. It will be shown that the differences in the ways that respondents express resistance to Asian racism are related to their different migratory status and their life stories.

None of the respondents denied the existence of racism and discrimination in France in general. Nevertheless, some respondents seemed to be in “denial” with regard to the existence of racism against Asians and, more specifically, to the forms of stigmatization and hostility toward people of Chinese origin. The majority of respondents in “denial” are migrants who have migrated to France since 1980, initially for the purpose of obtaining higher education. The respondents who acknowledge various levels of racism and react to it are mainly young people born between 1980 and 2000, who are either skilled migrants or descendants.

We begin by studying various forms of “denial” of anti-Asian racism. These “denial attitudes” are not exclusively linked to the pandemic period and, in some cases, precede it. We distinguish two social strategies at the heart of these “denial attitudes”: first, distancing from other groups (section 3.1) and, second, clearing their name through criticism of the Chinese political regime (section 3.2).

#### 3.1 *Strategy of Distancing from Other Ethnic and Racial Minorities and Other Groups of Chinese*

We distinguish two kinds of distancing from other groups. In the first one, people distinguish themselves from members of other ethnic and racial minorities, such as Black people and North Africans. In the second, people distance themselves from other people of Chinese origin, who are more marginalized than they are. We first look at the example of Qiaoling, a twenty-five-year-old student who earned a master’s degree from a *grande école* in France in 2020.



Personally, I have never experienced racism or discrimination in France, except for a few “glances,” which for me are neither racism nor discrimination. ... Here [in France], racism toward Chinese people is nowhere near as widespread as anti-Black racism. ... I’ve never had a problem finding an internship; it’s not like it is for Black people.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Qiaoling makes a clear distinction between the Chinese/Asian population and Black people. So does Mr. Zhang, a naturalized migrant who went to France in 1983 to obtain a PhD in science and is now the CEO of a hotel chain with more than a hundred employees. Zhang even distinguishes himself racially from other bosses:

Plenty of people have succeeded in French society—Chinese, Arabs, Blacks, French. If a Frenchman has a boss who is Chinese, he will be very happy and will say so. If his boss is a Black or an Arab, he will be more discreet. In the eyes of the French, the Chinese are superior to other ethnicities.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Zhang also demonstrates that the strategy of ethnic and racial distancing could be accompanied by also distancing oneself from more marginalized Chinese people. Indeed, according to Zhang, they are the ones who are victims of anti-Asian racism. He does not believe that racism affects people of Asian origin who have higher social position, which he describes as “successful men.”

You shouldn’t be too sensitive and categorize everything as racism. Free speech in an ironic tone is not always racism. ... For example, I have never experienced racism or discrimination, because I am a successful man in France. The French respect me.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Zhang and Qiaoling establish a range of differential treatment of ethnic and racial minorities in France that reflects a racial hierarchy. In order to deny that they might be targets of racism, they distance themselves from other ethnic and racial minorities. This attitude helps to forge and reinforce the “myth of the model minority” (Chou & Feagin, 2008), which we hear in the discourses of other respondents, in particular, descendants.

Zhang adopts a “classist” discourse to explain why he does not believe he could be a victim of racism. Several other respondents, naturalized migrants from a relatively privileged social background, employ the same discourse to

explain why they are spared from anti-Asian racism, in contrast to people of Chinese origin whose position is more precarious.

Fei, a twenty-four-year-old who arrived in France in 2015, is pursuing a master's degree in sociology:

Aggression and racism toward Chinese people exist, but they do not concern me. For example, very close to where I live [near the Strasbourg Saint-Denis metro station], there are many prostitutes from Northeast China, who are targets of aggression, both because of the fact that they are Chinese and because of the pandemic.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Cifeng, who is forty-four years old, arrived in France in 1998. She holds a doctorate in law and worked first as a lawyer and then as a Chinese language teacher at the university:

As far as I am concerned, frankly, no, I have never been yelled at in the street, no one has ever said to me “dirty Chinese,” ... I live in the eleventh arrondissement, in a rather privileged area. Perhaps these are reasons to take into account, and, moreover, I work at a university.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

Although these three respondents deny having been targets of anti-Asian racism, they seem to be aware of it and take proactive steps to avoid having to face it. For example, Cifeng, at another point in the same interview, said that in the weeks before the first lockdown in France, she had decided to wear a mask in the Metro but took it off as soon as she got outside in order to avoid the harassment experienced by other people of Asian origin.

According to some respondents from privileged backgrounds, they had not been victims of anti-Asian racism nor had their children. They explained this by their “distinguished” social environment, in particular the school that the children attended: a Montessori school in the Latin Quarter for one respondent who went to France at the end of the 1980s to study medicine; a private school, described as “one of the best schools in the northern suburb of Paris with the postal code 93” for another, who formerly worked in the Wenzhou region but is now a shopkeeper in Aubervilliers. We also see this strategy of distancing among some descendants of Chinese migrants, such as Charline, a twenty-six-year-old tobacconist, who states that she has not experienced racism and thinks that migrants were more prone to anti-Asian racism than descendants such as her.

- Q: Do you think that you have personally been a victim of racism?
- Charline: Not at all. I've never had any problems, nor has my brother, at school or at work; we've never had any problems. ... I think it can happen more to people who might have an accent, who don't know how to speak French very well. So, yes, I imagine that they ... are more easily verbally attacked, and ... easy prey.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JANUARY 2021

In these cases, the respondents deny having been victims of racism by pointing to their personal merits or their social advantages in the living society. Next, we analyze examples in which the respondents attempt to justify racist acts against people of Chinese origin in France by framing them as the consequence of the “faults” of the Chinese government.

### 3.2 *Strategy of Distancing from the Chinese Political Regime: a Posture Related to “Outsider” Status*

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in China, Chinese management of the health crisis has been strongly criticized in the Western press and media. In many Western countries, China was viewed as responsible for this pandemic. In the context of confrontation between China and the West, some Chinese migrants fear that they are no longer welcome in their host country. This is particularly the case for young educated migrants who are trying to find their “place” in French society.

Thus, one of the ways in which migrants seek acceptability in French society is by separating themselves from Chinese authorities. In practice, this distancing is accomplished by criticizing the health measures taken by the Chinese government. In doing so, these respondents show that they are neither dupes nor spokespeople for the Chinese political regime but the contrary: they are individuals with strong democratic beliefs. These individuals also tend to justify some of the racist behavior they encountered in the context of the pandemic.

For example, Feng, a twenty-five-year-old from Wuhan who has a degree in translation and communication, describes the containment measures taken by the Chinese government as “excessive.” She says that since she arrived in France in 2015, she has never experienced racism. She admits that, since Covid-19 broke out, when she takes public transportation with her partner (a Frenchman of Chinese origin), some passengers “have looked at them strangely” or changed trains. But she says that “it is normal. Everyone has their

own choices and ideas.” She says that she was not affected by these incidents. However, she admits half-heartedly that in the future she could be a victim of discrimination on the French job market, but blames the Chinese government because its politics provokes (legitimate) indignation among the French:

I don't know if discrimination affects the labor market. ... I don't know if overseas Chinese will be affected. ... Most educated or kind people know that the country and the individual can be separated. If they know you personally, they don't discriminate against you because of your country of origin. But if China makes decisions that cause public outrage, I don't know whether most people will have a bad impression of China, ... that's all I'm worried about.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Meng, a thirty-one-year-old migrant and a student in sound engineering, goes even further in his attack on the Chinese government. In discussions with his French professors and friends in January and February, he regularly denounced the Chinese government's “lies” about the number of deaths from Covid-19. In our interview, he argues that the Chinese government was to blame for letting coronavirus spread outside the country. For Meng, the fundamental reason for this error was the lack of democracy in China:

The Chinese government lied to everyone, letting everyone believe that this is the flu. How would you describe this? It is [a decision] against humanity.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

Meng asserts that in France, “there has never been any racism toward Chinese people since the beginning of the pandemic.” According to him, the term “Chinese virus,” which was widely circulated between January and March 2020, was not racist because “the source of the virus is in China, just as the Spanish flu was a hundred years ago,” and “many epidemics have been named after their place of origin.” It seems that denunciation of the shortcomings of the Chinese government prevents overseas Chinese from protesting the stigmatization of Chinese people.

The discursive attitude of these two respondents—criticizing the Chinese government, on the one hand, and justifying acts of Sinophobia, on the other—might seem surprising in the context of the increase in racist activities against Asians in France. But if we examine their migratory paths, these attitudes are more understandable. Indeed, in both cases, the respondents do not

intend to return to China; rather, they seek to settle in France after completing their studies. They are “outsiders” who aspire to integrate into the established group: the French society (Elias & Scotson, 1997). From this perspective, blaming the Chinese authoritarian regime is not a simple expression of an existing political view. By blaming the Chinese government, these respondents want to affirm their unconditional adherence to democracy and freedom, the flagship values of their host country. This affirmation entitles them to be perceived by their French interlocutors as having “integrated.” At the same time, they distinguish themselves from the authoritarian regime of their country of origin and position themselves among “democratic peoples.” Finally, the process of identification with French society involves its idealization. Thus, for these young Chinese migrants, criticism of the Chinese political regime and denial of racism in French society signal both their desire to emancipate themselves from their society of origin and to integrate into the host society.

In sum, the common characteristic of these individuals is their tendency to minimize racism, to seek justifications for racist actions, and to emphasize “fear of the virus,” rather than “fear of the Other.” This attitude pits them against those who voice or denounce racism during the pandemic.

### 3.3 *Anti-Asian Racism Is Expressed in Multiple Ways*

In this section, we explore the various discourses that acknowledge anti-Asian racism in France as well as the multiple ways of thinking about it and expressing that awareness, which takes different paths at different times among the Chinese in France. Even among those who acknowledge anti-Asian racism in France, it is expressed at various registers, ranging from description of an existing but marginal phenomenon to denunciation of a phenomenon rooted in French society.

#### 3.3.1 The Role of Covid-19 in the Awareness and Expression of Racism

The Covid-19 crisis plays a particular role in the awareness and expression of racism. In France, since January 2020, many migrants have been exposed to extremely violent racism that they had thought unimaginable before the crisis. Yuelin, a twenty-three-year-old law student, recounts:

I heard about people getting shampooed [people having soap thrown at them by strangers] on the subway, and it's a scary feeling. ... A lot of people heard about that happening; some articles about it were posted on WeChat.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

The fear of being attacked could cause self-censorship. This is the case of Jia, a twenty-five-year-old master's-degree student in Montpellier who, having learned about the attacks on Chinese students since February 2020, decided to go out less and not wear a mask in public. For these migrants, the Covid-19 crisis created a troubling moment, as it reveals a racism that they did not know existed and that they did not expect. Indeed, they did not grow up in China with an awareness of race, and, during the Covid-19 crisis, they faced racist attacks for the first time, sometimes violent. These people describe the racism they have experienced (or witnessed) in a descriptive, rather than analytical way; the statement of racism is thus limited to a description of individual or collective experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In their discourses, descendants demonstrate greater familiarity with the phenomenon of anti-Asian racism. However, the Covid-19 pandemic may still have played a triggering role in some people's awareness of their own vulnerability to racism. Amanda, a twenty-three-year-old descendant and a working business school student, recalls episodes of racism that she witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic:

I experienced racist situations, such as people keeping their distance from me on the bus because I'm of Chinese descent. ... At my university, someone of Chinese origin coughed and was harassed. ... I think racism was there before, but it became more visible, and there was something about Covid that made me feel more concerned.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

Amanda says that she had not really been aware of anti-Asian racism and that she discovered it during the Covid-19 pandemic. This account illustrates that the multiple acts of racism, especially media coverage of them, led people of Chinese origin to apprehend racism as something that concerns them. Indeed, the many accounts of incidents in the media enable individuals to raise their own lived experiences to a collective level, which had not been analyzed as racism, and lead to new interpretations of past experiences.

Other descendants in their twenties, unlike Amanda, say that they were aware of racism before the Covid-19 pandemic. These young people look at racism as a long-term phenomenon and speak about racist experiences they had experienced since they were young, often at school; they also describe evolution in this racist behavior and their collective perception over time: some insults and some forms of aggressions had become increasingly recognized as "racist" and directed at Asians. In describing the process of becoming aware of the anti-Asian racism, our respondents often evoke the deaths of Zhang Chaolin and Liu

Shaoyao (see note 2) as well as the demonstrations that followed, as symbolic and decisive moments that triggered a collective response within the Chinese communities in the face of racism. For example, Antoine, a twenty-three-year-old descendant and law student, describes his experience with racism as follows:

Antoine: I think that the attacks [experienced by people of Asian descent during the pandemic] are racist. ... It is the same as before the pandemic; it's just that now these attacks are related to the virus. ... The racism itself and the seed of racism have always been there.

Q: And you were already aware before that there was racism toward Asians?

Antoine: Yes, I even noticed that it was more and more recognized, still not enough, but more and more. ... There were even people who reacted to racist behavior toward me, whereas before I was absolutely alone in the world ... and it shocked absolutely nobody. ... In my distant memories, [forms of racism that I experienced] were the children who didn't want to play with me because I was a "dirty chink," and when I tell the teachers: "they don't want to play with me, because I'm Chinese," she laughs. ... And afterward, when I was in middle school, we were two Asians ..., and "dirty Chinese shit," expressions like that were used freely, and every time I seemed hurt, people thought that it was because there was "dirty" and "shit" in it. But that wasn't the problem. It's not the insult, because I can take a racist insult. What hurts is that people don't realize that it's a racist insult. ... I feel as if it's changed since [that time] but there is still a long way to go. But, yeah, it's changed a little bit. ... However, I feel as if, during Covid, racism was completely unleashed. ... But I have the impression that there is also an awakening of the Asian community in France with regard to racism. Maybe three or four years ago, a Chinese man [Liu Shaoyao] in the nineteenth arrondissement was killed by the police in his home. ... So, some young Asians demonstrated, and it became somewhat violent. ... which I think kind of brought this story to light.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JUNE 2020

Thus, in comparison to Chinese migrants, descendants demonstrate greater familiarity with the concept of racism. For first-generation skilled migrants,

the Covid-19 crisis is the main indicator of this racism, while, for others, especially descendants, it is only one manifestation of more longstanding racism, which is part of French history. Below, we discuss that racism is expressed in multiple registers.

### 3.3.2 Racism Is Qualified and Stated in Multiple Ways

The respondents do not express racism in the same way. Indeed, for some respondents, talking about racism during the interviews satisfied a real need for them to express themselves. Other respondents acknowledge the existence of racism but talk about it only in order to answer our questions, without showing any desire to say more about it. This was the case with one respondent, who works as a cashier at a Chinese supermarket in Aubervilliers, whose interview was very brief.

Q: Have you experienced racism and discrimination [at work]?

A: Well, my French is not good, so it's certain that there is some; people bother me on purpose.

Q: And when you encounter this kind of situation, how do you react?

A: No choice (laughs)—we can only let them go.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Other respondents, more fluent in French and more familiar with the phenomenon of racism, describe their experiences by borrowing scientific and activist terms. This is the case with Camille, a descendant of Chinese immigrants (fourth generation) and a master's student in sustainable development who was born on Réunion Island.

For me, it's important to tell the French public that they shouldn't believe that this racism was born with Covid and will end with it; this racism has systemic institutional roots, and it's not going to just end.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

By employing the term “systemic institutional roots,” Camille seems to be referring to racism in its sociological sense. In the same way, the term “racialized”—mentioned by Camille as well as other respondents, which is notably distinguished from “White”—shows a mastery of the concept of racism and the capacity to mobilize the scholarly or militant vocabulary of “race.” These analytical skills reflect their participation and exposition to discussions or debates on this topic. In the same way, other respondents, for example, mention the concept of the “model minority myth” to talk about anti-Asian racism.



Denis, a twenty-one-year-old descendant who works at his parents' grocery store, can define and conceptualize this "myth" and deconstruct it:

Well, I find [the myth of the model minority] stupid. ... All the preconceived ideas about Asians—that they are good workers, that they are good at math—well, I am the perfect example of how this myth is false! I'm sorry, but you can see me using a calculator, even for one euro, 1+1.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, JULY 2020

These different understandings of racism are also linked to different degrees of politicization (or not) in relation to racism. In this respect, Camille's case seems to illustrate how her awareness structures the ways in which she calls out and denounces racism. Camille was gradually sensitized and achieved awareness of existing anti-Asian racism during her youth. From the feeling of "disorientation" and of being "seen as a foreigner" in her own country when she arrived in France for her studies to the contradictory feeling of "familiarity" when she arrived in China later, during an exchange program: her experiences in different places and countries where she is perceived differently, as well as her own multiple cultural roots, drive her to engage in strong reflexivity and reveal to her the structural racism rooted in French society. From this perspective, anti-Asian racism preceded the Covid-19 crisis and, according to her, should not be regarded separately from racism against other minorities, because it is one of many expressions of the same phenomenon. However, the pandemic made anti-Asian racism more obvious and pushed a community that Camille defines as having been made invisible to react:

[The French media] did not take seriously the people behind it. We Chinese still had no personality, so, the media used the term "the yellow peril." They said that we were burying "pokemons,"<sup>3</sup> and, there was a wave of unabashed racism even more embedded in the media. ... These things have been around for a long time, but during the pandemic, it has been more concentrated.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

3 In April 2020, when the French TV channel BFMTV broadcasted images of ceremonies in China, including three minutes of silence in honor of the Chinese victims of Covid-19, Emmanuel Lechypre, an economic affairs commentator, said: "They're burying Pokémon"; *Le Parisien*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.leparisien.fr/international/coronavirus-bourde-sur-bfm-en-plein-hommage-pour-les-morts-de-chine-04-04-2020-8293965.php>.

Camille emphasizes that racism is manifested not only in physical or verbal attacks but also in how people of Chinese origin have been essentialized, dehumanized, and reduced to an indistinct multitude, to puppets, to “pokemons.” What is most shocking, according to Camille, is the fact that this racist behavior is normalized in ordinary daily relations and in media discourse. Moreover, this racism “has always been there,” but its normalized and anodyne character enables its expression and, at the same time, its concealment. Camille’s reflexivity and awareness also reveal generational conflicts within her own family, in which different positions emerge. Camille blames her father for being in denial, for not being aware of the racism that exists in French society and, inversely, for perpetuating it:

My father holds a very French position, and it is quite annoying. He sees himself as a Frenchman that people see as French. So, sometimes he forgets that he is of completely Chinese origin. And so, in reaction to all the racist attacks, he says, “Well, no, it’s not serious.” Or he says, “Camille, you should thank France for everything it has done for you; you should stop complaining all the time”—as if I have a duty to France, and I should thank France and kneel down to it.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Thus, even those who recognize and denounce racism have to take into account the multiple and different social meanings ascribed by these respondents to the term “racism.” Discussions of anti-Asian racism involve multiple understandings and apprehensions of racism, which are linked to different degrees of politicization regarding racism. These different ways of conceptualizing racism lead to the different ways of reacting to and fighting (or not) racism.

#### 4 Reactions to Racism

In this section, we analyze the different types of reactions to racism, focusing on reactions to attacks that our respondents interpreted as “racist.” We show that, in the face of racist incidents and based on how they are conceptualized by the respondents, the many types of reaction range from distancing and avoidance to immediate and personal reaction to political engagement. We show that the people who react in the most individual and collective ways to racism during the pandemic are the youngest and most educated respondents, mainly skilled migrants and descendants with different degrees of commitment in their struggle against anti-Asian racism.

#### 4.1 *Individual Reactions, from Avoidance to Direct Confrontation*

As seen earlier, some respondents experienced racism for the first time during the Covid-19 pandemic and are unfamiliar with its different manifestations. In this context, their reaction might be preceded by moments of indecision or hesitation and may tend to engage in avoidance or distancing.

Jianhe, a thirty-year-old doctoral student who had not experienced racism before the pandemic, describes his reaction when, while in a park with Chinese friends, some children pointed at them and shouted, “Chinese people have the virus”:

I was just ... embarrassed. He was just a kid. There's nothing you can do about it. ... You can't say to his parents, “Your kid said the Chinese brought the virus.” That can make people feel as if you're being overly sensitive or you're picking on the kids.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2020

Feeling embarrassed, Jianhe prefers to avoid responding. However, this incident made him aware that he can be the target of racist behavior and prompted him to share his experience with his friends and on social networks.

In other cases, awareness of racism leads to a more direct reaction. Jia, a master's student at the University of Montpellier, tells us that when she went into a grocery store with a friend to buy a drink, she heard the shopkeeper say the word “virus”; she also noticed that when she was about to pay, the shopkeeper had tripled the price. In reaction, she publicly accused him of being “racist” and decided to leave without buying anything. For Jia, the shopkeeper's behavior was clearly racist. She was angry and reacted to it by denouncing this behavior, refusing to pay, and leaving. Jia acts as an individual, with an instantaneous and public reaction that shows the conviction with which Jia considers this experience racist, and how unjust and contemptible she finds it.

Through these examples, we see that different levels of awareness of racism correspond to different types of reactions, ranging from avoidance to direct and public denunciation. These direct reactions can be followed by delayed reactions that are manifested in the denunciation of racist acts through social networks.

#### 4.2 *From Individual Reactions to the Collective Mobilization of First-Generation Migrants*

During the pandemic, the denunciation of experiences with racism (directly experienced or witnessed) can be made on social networks. The media coverage of anti-Asian racist attacks encourages the organization of collective

reactions. For example, that is the case with the collective “Audio, Video, Exprimō” (AVE; I hear, I see, I express myself), created in February 2020 by Yi, a former student in international trade, who lives in Marseille and posted on the Facebook group “*Les Chinois en France*” a call for participants in a short film to fight racism, combat stereotypes, and let the voices of Chinese migrants engaged in the struggle against Covid-19 be heard.

About fifty people of Chinese origin, mostly migrants, responded to this call. The film made by AVE, “Documentary on the Covid-19 Epidemic,” was first broadcast on March 7, 2020, and it has been viewed over 22 million times since then (Wang & Groupe “Audio, Video, Exprimō,” 2020).

The collective mobilization of the AVE group dovetails with actions by the Free Hugs collective started by a dozen people, most of whom are Chinese students. The Free Hugs collective engaged in symbolic performance at Trocadero Square and in front of the Opera in Paris: wearing masks, members of the collective offered hugs to passersby and displayed signs that said, “I am not a virus” and “I protect myself, I protect you.” The collective adopted a double strategy: direct actions in public to raise awareness among passersby through “face-to-face” exchanges, and indirect actions through social networks that aim to reach a larger public.

The collective actions described above are initiated by migrants at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic; other collective mobilizations are older and began long before the health crisis—for example, Ms. Cai, forty-five-year-old shopkeeper and practitioner of Chinese medicine, who originates from Wenzhou and went to France in 1988 at the age of twelve. In 1995, she became involved in volunteer activities and translations to help people from Wenzhou who did not master the French administrative procedures. In the 2000s, and in cooperation with Chinese business associations, Cai became an activist about security issues and defended other French citizens of Chinese origin who had been attacked and robbed in certain neighborhoods in Paris. Cai was an initiator of the demonstrations organized in neighborhoods of the Belleville in 2010 and later, in 2016 and 2017, denounced insecurity and police violence after the deaths of Zhang Chaolin and Liu Shaoyao. Since February 2020, she has supported Chinese organizations that respond to episodes of racism and discrimination experienced by children of Chinese origin at school as well as by shopkeepers and residents in Department 93.

Ever since January 2020, in conjunction with the pandemic, the terms “discrimination” and “racism” have become more common in Cai’s speeches and in her activism. On March 24, 2021, five young men were on trial at a Paris court for making calls for violence and hate against Chinese people on Twitter when the second lockdown was announced in France in October 2020. Before the

trial, Chinese activists such as Cai requested and obtained authorization to demonstrate. To “better prepare this demonstration,” a WeChat group was created by Cai on March 22, 2021, which soon gathered about thirty people from different migratory generations and professions, who were all interested in the trial and involved in the organization of the demonstration. They were mainly newcomers but also included a few descendants of migrants. Their number also included Chinese journalists in France, leaders of various associations, lawyers, and film makers (one coauthor also attended as a researcher). On the evening of March 22, a meeting was held by Cai via Zoom to coordinate and organize the details of the event: making signs, creating slogans, determining who could go inside the courthouse, and livestreaming communication and reporting (Wang, 2022).

This example demonstrates a gradual transition from voluntary activity such as mutual assistance in the 1990s, to mobilization to combat insecurity and police violence from 2010 to 2019, and finally to mobilization beginning in 2020 that brings together the issues of discrimination and racist attacks targeting the Chinese community in France.

#### 4.3 *Toward an Appropriation of the Anti-racist Discourse in the Mobilization of Chinese Descendants*

Cai’s activism and the mobilization of young Chinese students described above also resonate with the activism of the descendants. Nevertheless, the mobilizations of descendants can take a very different form. The Association of Young Chinese in France (AJCF) is of particular interest. Created in 2009, the AJCF is a nonprofit association that, according to the description on its website, historically has set a goal of “offering a space for exchange and expression for young French citizens of Chinese origin.” Since the beginning of the pandemic, the AJCF has noticed the resurgence of anti-Asian racism and reacted by denouncing it and publicizing it. To do this, the AJCF opened an email account to collect testimony from Asians who have experienced episodes of racism. The testimony was publicized on social networks and presented at events organized to discuss anti-Asian racism in France. Laetitia, a PhD student in history and president of the association, and Daniel, a former president and current vice-president who is now retraining to be a consultant, describe the unprecedented and massive nature of this mobilization with regard to anti-Asian racism during the pandemic:

It is unprecedented, we have never seen such a large wave of messages. ... We’ve also seen that there are a lot of people, young people of Asian descent who ... maybe some have become aware of anti-Asian racism,

but I think others have ... already been aware for a long time ... but who decided at that particular point [during the pandemic] to take action to deconstruct this racism.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

The increase in awareness of racism and the reactions to it driven by Covid-19 are also reflected at the AJCF. During the interview, discussing the perspectives on anti-Asian racism, Daniel refers to the “history of Asian struggles” and reveals, for example, that the term “racism” was not always used:

The history of the struggle against anti-Asian racism has reached some major milestones. It is often linked to a tragic event. The first big milestone was ... the death of Zhang Chaolin in 2016. That’s when tens of thousands of people gathered to talk about anti-Asian racism, and that word was still ... very taboo, because we were talking about “safety for everybody.” Our claims talked about the “dignity [of the victim],” “insecurity [being banned],” etc. ... But we didn’t talk much about racism. It was afterward, when a decision of the French justice system was announced, in which the aggravating circumstance of racism, of racist targeting, was alleged, that we really started to say, with other associations: if the justice system says that there is anti-Asian racism, it is because it must exist, and it is a term that we can use, then, it is no longer taboo.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

Daniel describes the progressive appropriation of the term “racism” by the AJCF. According to him, this appropriation was linked to institutional legitimization by a legal decision at a trial in which racism was considered an aggravating circumstance in the case of an attack on a person of Chinese origin.<sup>4</sup> The use of the term “racism” by the AJCF reveals the evolution of its discourse and interests.

In the following pages, we examine the posts published by the AJCF on its Facebook page from its creation in 2010 until July 2021 as an example of the gradual emergence of the topic of anti-Chinese attacks and evolution in the way in which this topic is presented, along with the issue of racism. The AJCF is not the only organization that denounces attacks and anti-Asian racism. However, it is one of the biggest and oldest in France that attracts people of

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4 This refers to the trial of three defendants who attacked women who were mostly of Asian origin between May and June 2019 in Paris and in a nearby suburb. The May 2020 court decision considers the racial aspect as an aggravating circumstance, due to the racist targeting.

Chinese origin. The case study of the AJCF allows us to go farther back in time and examine this evolution over a longer period.

#### 4.4 *A Gradual Appropriation of the Term “Racism” by the AJCF as a Tool for Collective Action (2010–2021): an Analysis Using Natural Language Processing (NLP)*

In order to examine the evolution of the AJCF’s public discourse in more detail, we study the AJCF’s posts on its Facebook page over a period of more than eleven years, between its first post on September 26, 2010, and July 24, 2021. After collecting all the posts published in this period, we analyzed their content with the NLP technique.

Three time windows are distinguished: between September 2010, when the organization’s page was launched, and 2014; between 2015 and 2019, a period marked by an increase in the number of attacks on people of Chinese and more generally Asian origin in several Paris neighborhoods and cities in nearby suburbs; and from January 2020 to July 2021, which covers the pandemic period.

Figures 10.4, 10.5, and 10.6 show word trees produced using the NLP technique, which analyze the relationship among the most frequently used terms in posts published by the AJCF on its Facebook page, in three time windows (2010-2014; 2015-2019; 2020-2021). Two points need to be clarified: (1) the lighter the term, the more frequent it is; and (2) a darker line between two

AJCF 2010/2014

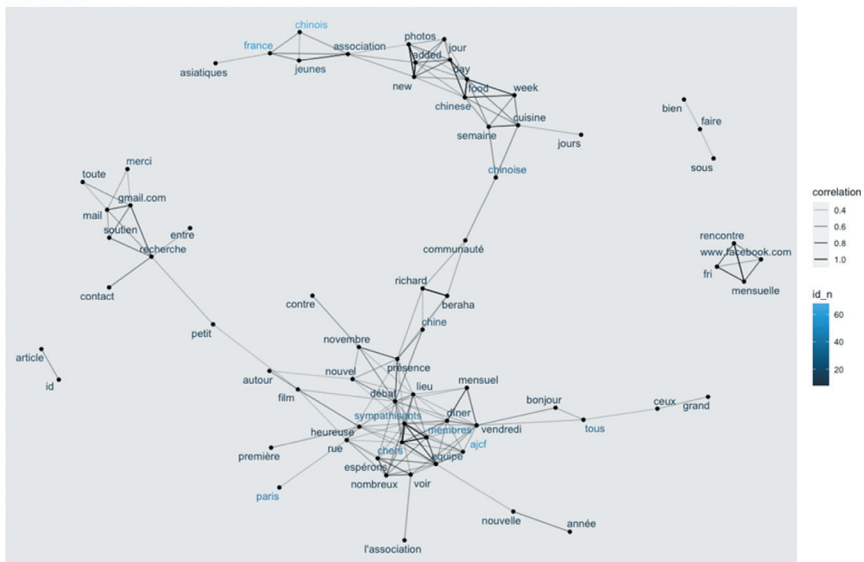


FIGURE 10.4 Tree graph of the relationship among the most frequently used terms in AJCF Facebook posts between 2010 and 2014



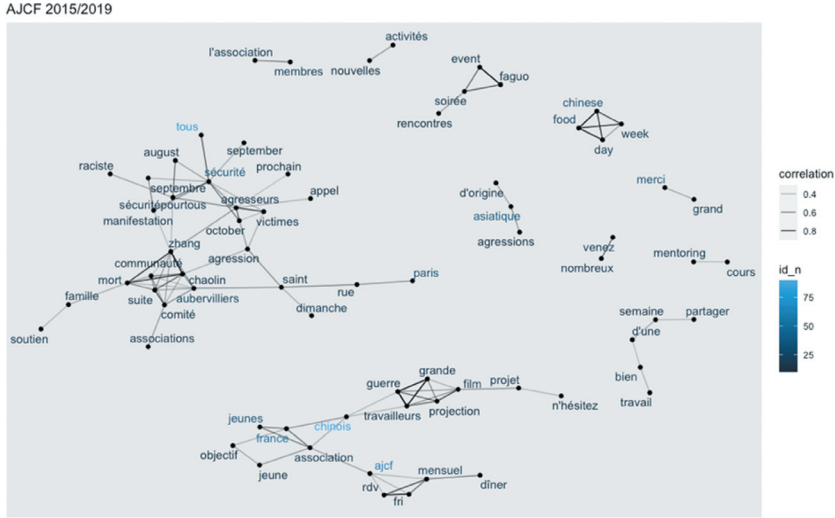


FIGURE 10.5 Tree graph of the relationship among the most frequently used terms in AJCF Facebook posts between 2015 and 2019

terms indicates a stronger correlation between the terms. The correlation measure is from 0 to 1, in which 0 means no correlation between two terms and 1 means complete correlation.

Between September 2010 and December 2014, the AJCF published 232 posts. Figure 10.4 shows that the posts are structured around two thematic poles. The first, at the very top, deals with recreational and cultural activities, particularly photography (“photos”) and cooking (“food week,” “Chinese cooking”). The second, and larger, thematic pole deals with associative activities, in particular, activities that aim to increase the association’s popularity, to attract members (“members,” “monthly dinner”), and to attract sympathizers (“sympathizers”).

In the second time window, from January 2015 to December 2019, the AJCF published 278 posts. As in the previous time window, Figure 10.5 shows that some of the themes deal with organizational and cultural activities. This is the case with the words at the bottom of the figure, which indicates a group of posts dealing with cultural activities, such as film screenings on the World War I (“screening,” “film,” “great,” “war”) and associated meetings (“dinner,” “monthly,” “meeting,” “association”).

The archipelago made up of a smaller and disconnected group of words on the righthand side of the figure also deals with cultural activities; one example is “Chinese” “food” “week” or “mentoring” “courses.” However, what draws our attention is the large word cloud on the lefthand side of the figure, which gathers posts that deal with the attacks on people of Chinese origin in Paris,



“racist” (13 times) also appears in this cloud; the term “racism” is notably correlated to the hashtag #sécuritépourtous, which we translate as #securityforeverybody.

We thus note that this word cloud is strongly marked by terms related to security and that the attacks are described in relation to common criminality. In this context, the terms “racism” and “racists” appear in a marginal way and have very little correlation with “security” (0.07).

Finally, we examine the last time window (see Figure 10.6), which covers the Covid-19 pandemic. We found that the AJCF published 189 posts, that is, less than in the previous time windows, but over a period of twenty months (instead of 52 and 60 months for the first and second time windows) and at a higher frequency than before: 9.5 posts per month between 2020 and July 2021, compared with 4.6 for the period between January 2015 and December 2019 and 4.5 in the period between September 2010 and December 2014.

We note the existence of several small groups of independent posts with cultural and event-related themes: in particular, we find the existence of a word cloud at the top left of the figure that deals with “events” and activities that bring together several “associations” (“associations” and the hashtag #toutlemondeensemble, which means “everyone united”). Similarly, we see a smaller cloud about Chinese New Year celebrations (“new year”) in January 2020 (“January”).

What is remarkable with regard to our study is a large word cloud that occupies the entire lower and middle portion of the figure 10.6. This group

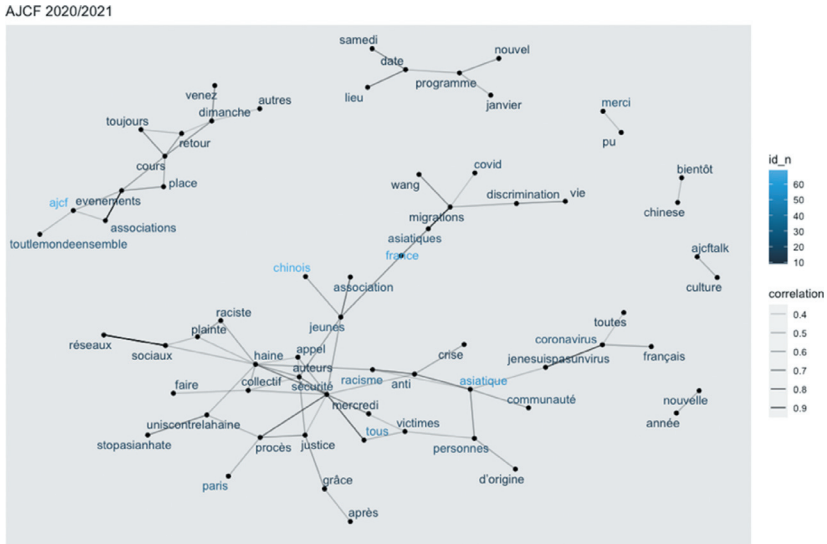


FIGURE 10.6 Tree graph of the relationship among the most frequently used terms in AJCF Facebook posts between 2020 and 2021

includes posts related to the upsurge in attacks on people of Asian origin from the beginning of the pandemic as well as different forms of reaction to these attacks. Along these lines, we note in particular the existence of two branches that extend to the extreme ends: in the first one, the term “covid” is in the center of the figure, and in the second one, the terms “French,” “all,” and “coronavirus” are at the bottom right. These two branches gather posts about the Covid-19 pandemic and converge toward the center of the cloud, which is made up of the terms “hate,” “security,” and “racism.”

The term “racism” has a dominating presence in this cloud. Indeed, the term “racism” is the ninth-most-used term over the period 2020–2021 after generic terms such as “Chinese,” “AJCF,” “France,” and so on (see Figure 10.6). More specifically, the term “racism” (in French) appears forty-seven times and the terms “racists” twenty-three times and “racism” (in English) six times and the hashtags “#stopracism” six times and “#racismeantiasiatique” five times. We emphasize that terms related to “racism” (“racism,” “racists,” etc.) appear much more often than in the previous time windows, 3.1 times more often than in the second window and 4.1 times more often than in the first window, and this over a period about one-third the size of previous windows.

The term “hate” is also strongly present in this cloud and appears nineteen times (compared with only three times in the previous window). Next to “hate,” we find word such as “hateful” and the hashtags #stopasianhate and #unicontrelahaine (which means “united against hate”), which appear 22 and 13 times, respectively. All these words form a “register of hate” that is strongly correlated with the register of racism.

The word “security” also appears in this cloud: however, in the previous period, it appears fifty-eight times (alone or in the hashtag #sécuritépour tous) and thus is the dominant semantic register, whereas in this period, the hashtag #sécuritépour tous and the word “security” appear only twenty-one times. Beginning in 2020, the word “security” is strongly associated with words such as “hate” (0.47), “racism” (0.32), and “racist” (0.16): security is therefore presented in relation to racist attacks. The contrast with the period 2015–2019, when the term “security” mainly referred to physical attacks during the commission of common crimes, is noteworthy.

Thus when we compare the posts about attacks on people of Chinese origin in the second and third time windows, we see a considerable shift in discursive registers. In the word clouds about attacks on people of Asian origin, the security register, which dominated between 2015 and 2019, is surpassed by the registers of racism and hate.

Another important aspect is that in posts about attacks on people of Asian descent in the period 2020–2021, the word “discrimination” appears eighteen

times. However, this word was never used between 2010 and 2019. Since 2020, we see the emergence of the racism, hatred, and discrimination registers in addition to the security register. This is a major indicator of the shift in the AJCF's discourse about the attacks on people of Chinese and Asian origin. Also beginning in 2020, the registers of security, racism, hatred, and discrimination are very strongly correlated with one another: "racism" is very strongly correlated with "hate" (0.38) and "security" (0.32) as well as to "violence" (0.35) and "trial" (0.40). In contrast, between 2015 and 2019, "racism" was mostly correlated with words such as "against" (0.24), "young" (0.24), and "society" (0.22).

In other words, in posts about attacks on Asians, between 2015 and 2019, the security register is dominant, and the racism register appears occasionally and is uncorrelated with the security register: the security register alone is sufficient for talking about attacks on Asians. However, beginning in 2020, the posts about attacks on people of Asian origin are strongly marked by the registers of racism and hate, and they are strongly correlated with each other and with the security register. This means that the security mindset, which is less present than in the previous period, is now defined more in terms of hate and racist attacks. In other words, post-2020, attacks are more often and more easily defined as "racist" and "hateful." This becomes even more obvious from the correlation in these two periods between words "attack" and "attacks" and the registers of "racism" ("racism," "racist," etc.), and of hate ("hate," "hateful," etc.).

Between 2015 and 2019, the word "attack" is not correlated with any of the terms in the racism or hate register and the plural, "attacks," is very weakly correlated with "racism" (0.05) and "racist" (0.06). The situation changes dramatically in 2020: during the pandemic, the term "attack" is very strongly correlated with "racist" (0.32) and less strongly with "hate" (0.13). Similarly, the term "attacks" (plural) is strongly correlated with the hashtags #stopracism (0.38) and #racismeantiasiatique (0.23) as well as with the words "racism" (0.14), "racist" (0.11), and "hate" (0.10) and more widely and very strongly with the words "discriminating" (0.34), "stigmatization" (0.27), and "discrimination" (0.25).

The NLP data indicate that the types of reactions to racist attacks on Asians seem to change between the second and third time windows, in the light of Covid-19. In particular, we examine the relationship between words that indicate types of individual and collective reactions and the words "safety" and "racism" (we exclude the words "discrimination" and "hate," which did not appear, or appeared very little, before 2020).

Between 2015 and 2019, the word "security" is correlated with "mobilization" (0.15) and "protests" (0.40); the word "racism" is correlated with "struggle"

(0.44). The reactions to the attacks took the form of calls to action and protest. Beginning in 2020, we see a huge change: “racism” is correlated with “mobilization” (0.15) and “protests” (0.40), whereas “security” is correlated with terms such as “to report” (0.22), “complaint” (0.38), the site “report.gouv.fr” (0.27), “reporting” (0.35), “sos” (0.35), “lawyers” (0.15), “type of complaint” (0.34). Moreover, the response to attacks begins to evolve, as legal tools, especially reports and complaints, are added to the public protests. In particular, the complaints address the racist and hateful nature of the attacks: in fact, “complaint” is very strongly correlated with “racist” (0.46) and with “hate” (0.44). In addition to the increasing awareness of the racist nature of attacks, we also note awareness that the racist nature of attacks is relevant to the legal actions taken. The strong correlation between “security” and the site “signalement.gouv.fr” suggest that the reports and complaints concern not only physical attacks but also the attacks on digital platforms and social networks. The site “signalement.gouv.fr” enables victims to report verbal attacks received online. This shows that the digital space has turned into a place where racism can be expressed as well as where action can be taken in response to racism (Wang, 2022).

Finally, we conclude this section by examining the frequency with which the “racism” and “hatred” register was mobilized in the period 2020–2021. Figure 10.7 illustrates, at a weekly frequency, the recurrence of words in related to racism (“racism,” “racist,” “racists,” “#stopracism,” “#racismantiasitics”) and to hate (“hate,” “hateful,” “stopasianhate,” “uniscontrelahate”) between January 2020 and July 2021.

The registers of racism and hate were mobilized in three time windows that correspond well to the three waves of the pandemic in France. The first window covers weeks 4 to 18, corresponding to the period from the end of January to the beginning of May 2020, which is the period characterized by the racialization of Covid-19 and the increase in the number and visibility of

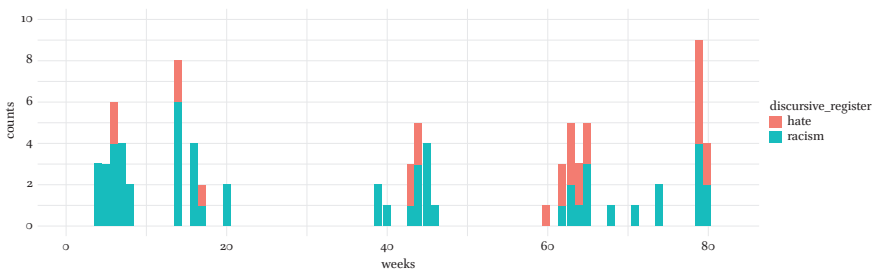


FIGURE 10.7 Recurrence of terms related to racism and to hate between January 2020 and July 2021 in the AJCF Facebook posts

racist attacks on people of Asian origin. The racism register was particularly strongly mobilized from weeks 4 to 8, when the pandemic began to spread globally and people of Asian origin were targeted as potential carriers of the virus.

The second time window is weeks 39 to 45, between the end of September and the first half of November 2020. In France, this period was characterized by the second wave of the pandemic and a rise in hostility toward and attacks on people of Asian origin. This period was notably marked by the explicit call for hate and attacks on Asians on Twitter by a group of people who considered Asians responsible for the pandemic (see *supra*). Groups mobilized to denounce racist remarks, and a lawsuit was quickly filed against those who launched this call.

Finally, the last period, weeks 62 to 80, from the beginning of March to the first half of July 2021, corresponds to a gradual rise in circulation of the virus, the tightening of control measures and, finally, the third lockdown in France, on April 5th–26th. This period also corresponds to when the people who published incitements on Twitter to attack people of Asian origin at the end of October 2020 were put on trial. This trial was followed closely by the AJCF and by anti-racist organizations in general (Wang & Madrisotti, 2021).

The register of hate gains frequency across the three time windows, and, in the last time window, is symmetrically paralleled by the register of racism. From the temporal perspective, the denunciation of racism seems to track circulation of the virus very strongly and seems to be increasingly structured and accompanied by the register of hate.

To conclude this section, four points should be emphasized. First, the way in which attacks on people of Asian origin are described has evolved considerably. The “security” register in 2015–2019 has been surpassed by the register of “racism” and “hate” and accompanied by the register of “discrimination.” Second, since 2020, attacks on people of Asian descent have been more clearly and frequently referred to as “racist,” “hateful,” and “discriminatory.” Third, these attacks were strongly linked to the Covid-19 pandemic and the racialization of the virus. In this regard, Covid-19 seems to have raised awareness of the existence of anti-Asian racism and led to a categorization of the attacks as racist and hateful. Finally, the types of reactions to attacks have also evolved: in addition to the calls for protests and demonstrations, since 2020 there have been calls to report and file complaints. This indicates the appropriation of legal tools and recourse to rights in the reaction to anti-Asian racism, pushing for social change. The AJCF is an example of a profound change in the Chinese population in France, in how it thinks about and combat anti-Asian racism in France.

#### 4.5 *From Fighting Anti-Asian Racism to General Anti-racist Struggles: Solidarity with Other Ethnic Minorities?*

It should be remembered that the AJCF's action is not representative of all the forms of mobilization and collective reaction by descendants. Daniel emphasizes this during the interview:

At that time, we saw that a lot of accounts were created on Instagram, well, on social networks in general but especially on Instagram; I think of Sororasie, Stop\_asiaphobia, Studiojaune. They grew very quickly and attracted thousands or even tens of thousands of followers.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, OCTOBER 2020

Daniel highlights the existence of other groups, which he associates with “anti-racist activism” and whose modes of action and political inspirations are, according to him, different from those of the AJCF. Camille, whom we did not interview as a representative of any particular movement but who nevertheless considers herself an activist in various groups, such as the PanAsiAFeminist Collective [*Collectif PanAsiAFéministe*, or PAAF] or others that are not concerned only with Asians, such as “Decolonizing the Arts” [*Décoloniser les arts*], positions herself in opposition to the AJCF:

Well, it is an association that I did not want to join precisely because of its position on security. It is very security minded and promotes culture, but does not question racism at all. That turned me off. ... it has an anti-racist position but a very bland one, a bit of *sos Racisme* (NGO), a bit of the *Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme* [LICRA; International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism], and for me it's not entirely anti-racist in fact, and, above all, it's a very security-based attitude, and that scares me a lot. This is not to criticize the AJCF as it does good things as well.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FRENCH, NOVEMBER 2020

Her speech demonstrates a number of political judgments of the AJCF and its conception of racism and anti-racist struggle, which she describes as “tepid” and the reason for her rejection. This position clearly highlights the political dissension among Chinese people who are committed and mobilized in the fight against racism. Camille's organizational commitment reflects anti-racist convictions that go beyond Chinese and Asian people but also fighting for the rights of other groups, including Blacks and North Africans. In this respect, Camille is not the only respondent who expresses concern about racism that

is not limited to Chinese or Asians. For example, when Denis talks about his activism at the time of Liu Shaoyao's death, he also mentions his mobilization for non-Chinese victims of police violence, such as Théodore Luhaka or Adama Traoré, and claims to have always tried to be present at all these demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> However, the connection of the anti-racist struggle between Chinese and other ethnic groups and the willingness to form solidarity with different minority groups are not shared by all respondents. Indeed, some respondents even pointed to the lack of support by Chinese people for the anti-racist struggles of other ethnic groups.

## 5 Conclusion

By using quantitative and qualitative data, our study analyzes the different attitudes among people of Chinese origin toward the attacks on them at a turning point in the history of anti-Asian racism, marked by the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, we examine how these attacks are experienced and reported across different groups within the Chinese population in France, with a time-based approach.

The quantitative data shows that 30 percent of our respondents report having experienced episodes of racism and discrimination since January 2020 and that 60 percent report that acts of racism against Asians have increased since March 2020. Moreover, descendants are more likely than migrants to report experiencing racism. Across all our groups of interviewees, the individual's age has a strong effect. Indeed, among both descendants and migrants, as age increases, the tendency to report experiencing racism decreases. We highlight that these differences reveal differentiated levels of familiarity with the experience of racism in general and anti-Asian racism in particular, and this is also true of how racism is thought about and described.

We also explore how respondents voice the experiences of anti-Asian racism they personally suffered or witnessed. The qualitative survey enables us to distinguish the various attitudes adopted by the respondents in the face of anti-Asian racism. First, the attitude of people who are "in denial about racism": they explain racist acts as a result of "fear of the virus," rather than as "fear of the Other." Some respondents deny the possibility of being victims of racism by emphasizing their personal achievements or their privileged social

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5 On February 2, 2017, Théodore Luhaka, at the age of 22, was seriously injured at a police checkpoint in Aulnay-sous-Bois (Seine-Saint-Denis). On July 19, 2016, Adama Traoré, age 24, died after his arrest by police in Beaumont-sur-Oise.



position in the living society, while others try to justify racist acts against people of Chinese origin in France as being the “fault” of the Chinese government. This attitude is mainly common among educated and middle-aged migrants.

Second, some respondents describe and denounce anti-Asian racism during Covid-19. Compared to Chinese migrants, the descendants show greater familiarity with the concept of racism. For the former, the pandemic has revealed anti-Asian racism, whereas for many descendants, the racism experienced during the pandemic is only one manifestation of longstanding racism in French society. These heterogeneous explanations reveal different degrees of awareness of the phenomenon of racism and different relationships to “race.” They are structured into different narratives, from descriptions of personal experiences to the explanation of these personal experiences in terms of the evolution of French society and the use of scientific concepts and political rhetoric.

Finally, multiple types of reactions and battles (or not) against racism emerge from these differences in how racism is conceptualized. The reactions range from strategies of distancing and avoidance to immediate and personal reaction to political engagement. Among the migrants, the pandemic has led to the emergence, in an unprecedented way, of collective mobilization against anti-Asian racism in France. Among the descendants, who are already more familiar with the phenomenon of racism, we observe an orientation toward the appropriation of anti-racist discourse in their mobilization (Wang et al., 2022).

Generally speaking, we stress the role of the pandemic in the increased awareness and fight against racism among the Chinese population in France. In a context characterized by an increase in media coverage of anti-Asian racism, Chinese migrants are experiencing a turning point in their ways of perceiving, thinking about, and fighting anti-Asian racism, and several new anti-racist collectives and actors are emerging. However, descendants are reconsidering racist experiences in the past in the light of awareness due to the health crisis. The role of the pandemic in raising awareness of the existence of anti-Asian racism is mirrored in the evolution of the interests and discourses of the AJCF from 2010 to 2021. At least since 2015, the AJCF has begun to denounce the attacks on people of Chinese origin in France. From 2015 to 2019, the attacks were portrayed with the security register, in particular as being associated with common crime. But after 2020, in parallel with the pandemic period, the attacks are more frequently described through registers of racism, hate and discrimination. The example of the AJCF, with its specificities, reveals a deep change in the population of Chinese origin in France, in how it thinks and speaks about anti-Asian racism.

Our study also raises the more general question of the anti-racist struggle and the (im)possibility of a collaboration between people of Chinese origin



and other ethnic minorities, including non-Chinese Asians. Indeed, this vision of racism alongside black and other brown people is not shared by all interviewees. In line with other empirical studies carried out in France, we recognize the lack of Chinese support – notably from first-generation migrants – for the anti-racist struggles of other ethnic groups (Wang, 2022). These research questions on inter-ethnic relations in the common struggle against racism, and on the social conditions for “pan-Asian” solidarity (Wang et al., 2023), would benefit from other in-depth studies in the future.

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