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Conclusion

Simeng Wang

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Chinese in France amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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

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Conclusion

Simeng Wang

Richard Horton (2020), the editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, calls for considering Covid-19 a syndemic, which reveals biological and social interactions that are important for prognosis, treatment, and health policy. This approach invites a larger vision, encompassing education, employment, housing, food, and the environment. In his essay, he gave the examples of vulnerable people—the elderly as well as Black, Asian, and other minority ethnic communities—and predicted that no matter how effective a treatment or protective a vaccine is, the pursuit of a purely biomedical solution to Covid-19 will fail. A full solution requires a reduction in social disparities and more equitable access to health care and social welfare. As part of incorporating a sociological view of health and illness into this solution, our book is an invitation to pay attention to social conditions and inequalities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This volume shows the extent to which the living conditions of Chinese populations abroad are connected to both their country of origin and their living country. Several chapters describe the existence of a gap in terms of social experiences (attitudes, portrayals, and behaviors) between Chinese people in France and the French majority. This is undoubtedly due to social inequalities between racial/ethnic minorities and the majority, in terms of access to health care, housing conditions, food access, institutional racism, and racial discrimination. At the same time, the book reveals the differences in the strength and the intensity of the connections to China among the respondents to our survey: for some, China is the motherland, and, for others, it is the home country of their parents. The pandemic reshaped their relationship, both material and symbolic, to China.

Another feature of the book is our attention to heterogeneity among the Chinese population in France in terms of the social experiences and living conditions during the pandemic. Indeed, Chinese people in France were already experiencing social inequalities and social differentiation before Covid-19, and, as illustrated in many chapters, the pandemic had different impacts on them depending on their age, gender, migratory generation, social background, education level, profession, and regional origin in China. Hence, an intersectional approach that recognizes these various social relationships proved essential for understanding the differentiated social representations and practices adopted by Chinese people in France during the health crisis (i.e., media consumption, preventive measures, self-reported stress, food behaviors, mutual assistance,

community protection). Doing otherwise risked falling into a vision of this immigrant population that is reductive and relativizing.

In this book, we make contributions to three distinguished academic fields: studies of overseas Chinese, migration studies, and global health studies, especially during a global health crisis.

First, this volume fills a gap in the study of Chinese overseas, with respect to the following research topics relatively unstudied concerning Chinese migrants and descendants, in particular those residing in Europe: multiple roles played by WeChat, media consumption, health and mental health, racism and discrimination, aging and care of the elderly, and food behaviors. We have seen the extent to which the Chinese application WeChat is omnipresent in the everyday life of overseas Chinese, all the more so during the pandemic, as mentioned throughout the book. It is also analyzed the potential for a digital transformation in the post-Covid world (Kuah & Dillon, 2022), including the transnational platform capitalism (Boyer, 2020) among the Chinese diaspora and beyond it.

Second, this book adopts a multiscalar perspective and articulates local, national, and transnational analytic scales. “Actor-oriented” and “policy-driven” approaches have been combined to study a diaspora, which enabled us to make “bottom-up” as well as “top-down” analyses of the same phenomenon and social practices. For example, the empirical data that we collected by interviewing Chinese students in France about the distribution of Covid-19 health kits (see Chapter 12) produced knowledge on diaspora policies from below. It showed how the distribution actually operated in the space that connects the State and the diaspora, which is mostly composed of individuals with diverse social profiles. In this sense, varying the perspectives helps to demystify the way in which the Chinese regime operates in the implementation of its diaspora policies and in its relations with overseas Chinese.

Third, from a theoretical perspective, the volume illustrates the heuristic value of a study on the diaspora to apprehend the global dimension of this health crisis and its multiple and differential effects on the migrant populations and their descendants. Because of the temporalities and spatiality it encompasses, the analytical category of a “diaspora” proved ideal for understanding a transnational phenomenon such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The transnational perspective created by observing a diaspora enabled us to examine the effects of this pandemic on the practices and lifestyles of migrants and their descendants, living in a situation of in-between. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is all the more revealing to study the Chinese diaspora. Given that the virus first emerged in China, the Chinese diaspora has suffered from its consequences, including racialization of the virus and stigmatization. Moreover, the fact that China is a big actor in the global production chain for medical supplies

(protective masks, medical equipment, etc.) enables overseas Chinese to participate in the provision and transnational shipment of masks and other medical supplies, to ensure different forms of transnational solidarity, and to respond not only to members of the diaspora but also to the living countries. In summary, using a diasporic approach creates greater understanding of the social consequences of a pandemic at multiple levels as well as the emergence of new forms of connections, community, and struggles in the context of a global crisis.

This book has a few limitations. The first one is its reliance on a survey carried out in the fieldwork on a health crisis while it was occurring (2020–2022). Studying a social event while it is in progress presents several challenges for researchers, in particular methodological difficulties. The second is that, because of international travel restrictions, we could not go to China and conduct multisited ethnographies there.

Two main reflections emerged as directions for future research that deserved to be mentioned. First, starting from a baseline of knowledge offered by chapters here included, further research is needed to explore the following themes over a long period: mobility and immobility after the pandemic; globalization and deglobalization; geographic, symbolic, ethnic and racial bordering. The results presented in this book might be put into discussion with other work in the future—for example, the social, economic, political and geopolitical effects of Covid-19 on Chinese diasporic policy making in the digital era and on changes in the migratory paths taken by Chinese migrants and their descendants living in Europe. Secondly, it would be interesting to compare our findings not only with researches carried out on Chinese people residing in other European countries and beyond; but also with studies dealing with the experiences of other ethnic and racial minorities in France or around the world (Banerjea, 2021; Smith et al., 2022).

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