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► **To cite this version:**

Emmanuel Santarromana, Simeng Wang. “Thanks for Getting Me in Touch with Local Politicians!”. *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 2023, 19 (2), pp.324-350. 10.1163/17932548-12341493 . hal-04313047

HAL Id: hal-04313047

<https://hal.science/hal-04313047v1>

Submitted on 28 Nov 2023

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“Thanks for Getting Me in Touch with Local Politicians!”

A Sociological Study of the “Association of Young Chinese in France” as a Political Professionalization Springboard for Descendants of Chinese Migrants

“感谢把我介绍给当地政客！”

一项以发挥跳板作用的“法国华裔青年协会”为例的华裔移民后代政治职业化的社会学研究

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Received 30 January 2023 | Accepted 25 August 2023 |
Published online 31 October 2023

Abstract

This article focuses on the political engagement and professionalization of French youth of Chinese origin through a case study of the Association of Young Chinese in France (Association des Jeunes Chinois de France, AJCF), acting as a springboard

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toward political professionalization. It relies on several qualitative studies recently carried out in the Paris region, with French associative and political actors of Chinese origin. After analyzing the raising of awareness regarding anti-Asian racism as a key factor in the political socialization and engagement of French Chinese youth, the article shows that being a leading member of the AJCF allows one to build a social network of contacts among political actors and affirms that this acquired political capital is one of the catalysts for being identified and recruited by political authorities at the local level, as a step toward the development of an electoral career.

Keywords

political socialization – political professionalization – anti-Asian racism – visible minorities – Chinese people in France – descendants of Chinese migrants

摘要

本文以“法国华裔青年协会”（Association des Jeunes Chinois de France, AJCF）作为分析案例，研究华裔青年在法国的政治参与和政治职业化，着重阐述该协会在华裔青年政治职业化中所发挥的跳板作用。基于在巴黎地区近期开展的一系列质性调查，本文的研究对象是活跃在法国协会和政界的华裔青年。本文首先分析针对反亚裔种族主义的意识觉醒在法国华裔青年政治社会化和政治参与过程中所发挥的关键作用。其次，文章指出成为“法国华裔青年协会”的领导或核心成员能帮助他们与政客们建立社交网络，并且这些通过领导协会而获取的政治资本是这些华裔青年在地方层级被政治权力机构所识别和被招募的催化因素，从此投身政治、发展选举生涯。

关键词

政治社会化 – 政治职业化 – 反亚裔种族歧视 – 可见少数族裔 – 法国华人 – 中国移民后代

1 Introduction

While we know Paris and its region contain the fourth largest community of Chinese origin in the world outside Asia (Textor 2022), one can only be surprised at the low number of publications on political engagement and participation

among Chinese people in France, except for recent research on demonstrations organized by Chinese migrants and their descendants (Chuang 2018; Wang 2019), on the generational transition among Chinese population in Paris (Wang and Le Bail 2016), and on Chinese associative networks as a basis for mobilizations and ethnic grouping (Chen 2016; Chuang 2018; Wang 2022). Those studies naturally echo research carried out in other industrialized countries with significant Asian communities in their urban areas (Chang 2002), especially some recent works studying the political engagement³ of Chinese Americans (Jeong 2017); the political under-representation of Chinese minority in Canada (Passy and Gueye 2011), and electoral participation among Chinese migrants in the USA (Wong *et al.* 2019).

Unlike Anglo-Saxon countries, the French universalist republican paradigm⁴ does not favor the political representation of immigrant populations as such (Jennings 2000; Schor 2001). As a matter of fact, over the past eight years, four former presidents of the Association of Young Chinese in France (Association des Jeunes Chinois de France, AJCF)⁵ have become political professionals within local executives. It is the only Franco-Chinese association that has such a high rate of political engagement among its former members. Within the wider French context, the case of the AJCF becomes extremely interesting. One might ask: why do political parties recruit ethnic Chinese and include them in the political field? By which mechanisms? And why specifically the AJCF? These are the questions we aim to answer in this article.

Through a case study of the AJCF, this paper focuses on the political engagement and professionalization of French youth of Chinese origin and aims to contribute not only to the research field on Chinese migration to France, but also more generally to political science studies devoted to the political engagement of ethnic minorities, and to enable cross-border comparisons with other countries.

This paper relies on several qualitative studies based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation, carried out during two major research works. The first one is a field survey carried out in 2021–2022 in the Paris

3 Political engagement covers all actions carried out by citizens to question public authorities or to participate in political life.

4 It is in accordance with the ideals of equality, public order and centralization proper to the French conception of the republic. The French republican paradigm, integrationist and universalist, is reluctant to recognize membership of an individual group and has long been slow to accept the representation of immigrant populations in the political sphere, an approach that sets it apart from Anglo-Saxon countries.

5 <https://www.lajcf.fr/>.

region among elected officials and association leaders of Chinese origin (first-generation migrants, descendants born in France and descendants of the generation 1.5), on the political professionalization of local elected officials of Chinese origin in Île-de-France. About twenty actors were interviewed for approximately one hour, some of them several times. We also attended some of the municipal councils on which they sit. The second body of empirical data comes from a collective and funded project (“MigraChiCovid”)⁶ of which one of the research questions analyzing the variety and evolution of postures toward anti-Asian racism aimed at Chinese people in France. In this article, we anonymized all interviewees.

In the first section, after a literature review on political engagement especially among visible minorities in France, we emphasize the absence of intra-family political socialization in Chinese families living in France. In the second part, we focus on the raising of awareness regarding anti-Asian racism as a key factor in the political socialization and engagement of French Chinese youth. Thirdly, we retrace the history of the AJCF, study its specific place in the landscape of Chinese associations, and show how the AJCF has become politicized over time, particularly in its claims concerning insecurity and racism issues. In this third part, we also highlight the weight of the AJCF at the local level, vis-à-vis the French authorities, as well as its key role in the co-production of public actions aimed at encouraging political expression and participation within the Chinese minority in France. In the last section, we analyze the essential role of the AJCF in the political professionalization of French youth of Chinese origin, and in the formation of future political elites. We show that being a leading member of the AJCF allows one to build a social network with political actors, journalists, and notables of the Chinese community. We argue that this acquired political capital is one of the catalysts to be identified and recruited by political authorities at the local level and favors their political ascent in the perspective of an electoral career. As a matter of fact, in the ongoing political arena, the influence of professionals is directly tied to their ability to mobilize support, which is determined by the trust and credibility they garner from their constituents or the entities that support and invest in them (Bourdieu 1981).

6 The MigraChiCovid research Project (“Chinese migration in France facing the Covid-19 pandemic: the emergence of new forms of solidarity in times of crisis”) is funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR-20-COVI-0046-01, 2020–2022). Cf. Project website: <https://www.migrations-asiatiques-en-france.cnrs.fr/projet-migrachicovid/resume-scientifique-du-projet-migrachicovid>.

2 The Lack of Intra-familial Political Socialization versus the Associative and Political Engagement among Young French of Chinese Origin

Political engagement covers a whole range of political behaviors: militancy (party membership, associative activism) and all associated practices (cell and section meetings, rallies, poster-posting, interventions on social networks), but also participation in collective actions (strikes, demonstrations, signing petitions) as well as voting. In our analysis, the concepts of political engagement and professionalization also integrate the notion of career in a conception of activism as a process, borrowed from symbolic interactionism (Fillieule 2001).

In his book *Logic of collective action* published in 1965, the economist Mancur Olson highlights what is now known as Olson's paradox: "the community of interest, even when it is an obvious given for all, is not enough to provoke joint action to promote the interest of all" (Olson 1978). According to Olson, an important part of the explanation for mobilization lies in the presence of selective incentives that create an inducement to engage by linking individual benefits to participation.

In the socio-psychological domain, researchers have long focused on participation in collective action and political engagement, particularly among young people. In this perspective, recent works concentrate on the contexts of political socialization among youth and their politicization profiles (Barrett and Chryssochoou 2017). Most research shows how primary socialization (family and school) plays a determining role in the predisposition to become interested in the world of politics, and even more so in activism. Some research suggests that discussions that parents have with their teenage children on political and civic topics can have a positive influence on their future civic development (McIntosh 2007). In these conditions, the social factor is preponderant. For example, situations of precariousness are one of the causes of political apathy and the absence of primary intra-familial political socialization (Bègue 2007). Similar studies abound, carried out in France (Bargel and Darmon 2017; Gaxie 1978; Percheron 1985) or in the United States (Jenning and Niemi 1974). Recent surveys challenge the vision that children simply adopt their parents' political beliefs, particularly among immigrant children. Instead, children form their own political views based on personal interest and experience. Political socialization is not a linear accumulation but is shaped by children's early preferences, which solidify over time. Children's understanding of the social order and their socialization experiences, primarily within families and schools, provide them with perception models for categorizing political

professionals and being engaged in political conversations. These experiences vary across social backgrounds, genders, and migratory origins, resulting in diverse representations incorporated by children (Lignier and Pagis 2017; Pagis 2017).

What is most striking about descendants of Chinese migrants living in France is the almost total absence of intra-familial primary political socialization regarding French political issues. It is worth noting that most descendants we met in surveys – and generally speaking, in modern-day France, young adults born of Chinese migrants – come from Zhejiang province and their parents arrived in France in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s for economic reasons, sometimes as undocumented migrants (Wang 2021). Even today first-generation migrant parents who have achieved some social status (for example having regularized their administrative status, or having opened a small business) have had to survive in an extremely precarious environment during the early years after their arrival in France. The precarious social situation and the survival obligation of these Chinese migrant parents can explain their “political apathy and political inaction” (Bègue 2007) in the host country in terms of both acts (voting, activism) and political opinions.

Eric is a child of migrants arrived in the nineties. He is originally from the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang. He was 7 years old when he migrated to France and joined an introductory class reserved for newly arrived allophone pupils. After three difficult years in hiding, his family benefited from the wave of regularizations put in place by the Jospin government in 1998. Eric is one of the co-founders of the AJCF, of which he was the rotating president from 2015 to 2017. He is currently a city councilor in Pantin.

Eric: “The Chinese, even a part of the French of Chinese origin, are subjected to Chinese codes and partly to the Chinese codes of the People’s Republic of China. That is to say that they have been used to being uh ... suspicious of power and at the same time very respectful, because they say to themselves that if we are not respectful uh ... the person in power can do me dirt ...” (Interview conducted in January 2022).

This lack of political culture, sometimes this distrust of governmental power, stems from their political socialization in the context of an authoritarian regime. The Chinese political environment is far removed from those found in Western democracies. The fear of political expression in public is very strong. Under such a regime, individual expression is rare, intermediary bodies are virtually non-existent, and mechanisms for representation and coordination among citizens are totally controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (Thireau 2014). We should also mention that most of the Chinese migrants

who arrived in France in the first half of the 1990s experienced the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when they were young, one of the most troubled periods in contemporary China, under Maoist totalitarianism. This is not a characteristic specific to families originating from mainland China. It is also the case for Southeast Asian families. Beyond their social situation and different migratory contexts, families of Teochew origin in Southeast Asia have similarly had to learn to live with the consequences of authoritarian communist regimes, even totalitarian in some cases (Josson 2002). They also have a very distant relationship to politics.

The testimony of Jean, a former President of the AJCF, is relevant in this respect. He was born in France in 1990. His parents are naturalized French Vietnamese, but originally from China. They are part of the Teochew community that arrived in France in the 1970s as refugees from the Vietnam War. He was raised in Chilly-Mazarin, in the Essonne department, in the suburban Paris.

Jean: “My parents ... They didn’t go to school, even when they were in Vietnam. They started to work very early, it was during the war. They are not very cultured people, intelligent but not very cultured in school. Their concern was to work. At home in the evening they relaxed, we never talked about political or geopolitical problems or their ancient immigration history etc.” (Interview conducted in October 2021).

We must also mention the language barrier which obliges first-generation migrants to obtain information from Chinese-language media that are not very focused on French politics, and often defend a pro-Chinese political line. Moreover, the Chinese Embassy in France participates also in the revitalization of cultural and political belonging to China among Chinese overseas, by networking with various associations of first-generation migrants.

If these families do not fulfill their role of intergenerational transmission of political culture, from which these young descendants should internalize the elementary foundations of the political world, primary political socialization can, on the other hand, be exercised outside the family, notably at school which plays a role in training future citizens capable of participating in political life. Civic and moral education “officially aims to ensure that pupils, regardless of their social background, are ‘ready’ to take part in politics, take an interest in it and to vote” (Douniès 2019). Political socialization at school would generally benefit children born in France more than those of the 1.5 generation, but the age of the children of the 1.5 generation at which they arrived in France and the social environment of their schooling⁷ is obviously an important factor to

7 For example, all children born in France we met spoke of the importance their parents attached to their educational achievement. It meant, for some, moving to better schools.

take into account. This assessment between two groups also depends on the moment at which the interview is conducted, and in particular on how this moment fits into the interviewee's life course.

3 Raising Awareness about Anti-Asian Racism, Political Socialization and Mobilization of French Chinese Youth

According to a recent study by France Bénévolat, carried out in partnership with Crédit Mutuel, the volunteering in associations has increased from 23% of French people in 2010, to 25% in 2013 and 2016, and has declined slightly since then, to 24 % in 2019 (Pascaud and Simonin 2019). Concerning association activists, numerous studies establish that they are generally more highly educated than the average, and this is particularly true in associations devoted to the fight against racism. For example, some works show that in an association such as the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (League of Human Rights), the activists are highly endowed with cultural capital (68% have a university degree) and 42% of the local leaders are teachers (Agricoliensky 2001).

Research on associations of North African immigrants make the same observation that the professional situations of their members, generally precarious, are out of step with their high level of education. One emphasizes “the feeling of relative frustration individuals may experience when they see the gap between the aspirations they were entitled to conceive and their objective professional success” (Hamidi 2002: 156). This distortion between their precarious professional situation and their substantial level of education is often perceived as resulting from discrimination in hiring, and more widely from racism experienced by people of immigrant origin in France. The statistical data from the French National Institute of Statistics (INSEE) “paint a picture of a labor market that is extremely contrasted between individuals of immigrant origin and those whose presence in France goes back several generations” (Jacquemet 2013: 1).

Perhaps even more so than for white anti-racist activists, who are conscience-driven activists and have never experienced racism, in the eyes of many people with an immigrant background, the experience of racism seems to legitimize the transition to collective action. Researchers have noted that the resurgence of acts of a racist nature generally translates into greater

Compared to children of the 1.5 generation, children born in France have usually benefited from their parents' greater socio-economic upward social mobility in French society, which has translated into greater dedication to their education.

political activism, particularly among the younger generation (Sadhvani and Kulkarni 2021). One of the responses to racism and discrimination is therefore naturally for them to form associations to defend their rights and challenge racist discourse, as was the case for Marc.

Marc has been a borough councilor in the XIX^e arrondissement since 2014, elected as a civil society representative on the Hidalgo – L’Avenir en Commun, a left-leaning list. He was also president of the AJCF from 2012 to 2014. He was born in China and arrived in France at the age of 6, to join his parents who arrived in France three years earlier. Like many children of the 1.5 generation, he also entered a class reserved for newly arrived allophone pupils, and did all his schooling in France to become a lawyer in 2009.

Marc: “I’m 100% Chinese, 100% French, it’s a mixture of both in fact. I dream in Chinese and in French, depending on the circumstances. But on the other hand, maybe the fact that I wanted to create an association to defend the Chinese community, I think it’s more the fact that the other part of me, the Chinese side in fact, which is the most visible, has been extremely denigrated. In fact, I suffer from this” (interview conducted in March 2022).

Historically in France, one of the founding moments of the awareness of racism and the call for mobilization among visible minorities was undeniably the “March for Equality and against Racism” (*Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racismisme*) in 1983, initiated by young people belonging to the second and third generations of North African migrants. Whether it is the March for Equality and against Racism or the recent Chinese community demonstrations, these movements brought together individuals who have lived through these experiences and seek to raise awareness of issues related to racism and promote racial equality (Laplanche-Servigne 2014).

In fact, raising awareness about anti-Asian racism plays a crucial role in the secondary political socialization of French individuals of Chinese origin, specifically those in the 1.5 and children born in France. Like the children of North African immigrants who participated in the March for Equality and against Racism, the Chinese-origin interviewees participated in anti-racist movements driven not only by political and moral convictions, but also by the personal need to denounce racism and discrimination against their community. In this respect, racist attacks experienced as events have led to a reflection on the increase in racism awareness and contributed to political and racial socialization (Bargel 2009). The case of Jean is relevant.

Jean: “I joined the AJCF in 2014, at the beginning my goal was to deconstruct the bad image that was linked to Chinese food, I dedicated myself to this project because I also saw the impact of a report on France 2 (French TV channel) on the poor hygiene conditions, on what we saw in the press. The syndrome

of Chinese restaurants on glutamate etc. Eating Chinese food could make you sick" (interview conducted in October 2021).

It is important to emphasize that this raising of awareness about racism in France has been exacerbated by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic (Wang et al. 2021). The latest MigraChiCovid research emphasizes in particular the racialization of the disease, and highlights the key role played by the AJCF in the associative response to this development of anti-Asian racism. The MigraChiCovid study shows that the reactions and responses vary according to the different groups' migratory status, age and social status, closely related to the political and racial socialization of each individual (Wang et al. 2022). Compared to first-generation migrants, descendants are more familiar with racism and ethno-racial discrimination and are more likely to report the racist attacks they have experienced. Moreover, this research work underlines the emergence, since the Covid-19 pandemic, of other initiatives and collectives aimed at combating anti-Asian racism, especially on the web (for example: @asiatitude, @sororasie, @stopasiaphobie, @studiojaune), most often initiated by children of Asian origin born in France.

The multiplication of websites and the use of social networks (Instagram/Facebook, WeChat, etc.) are part of this politicization movement. In England for example, social media facilitate personal expression, collective identity construction, and social and political mobilization (Parker and Song 2007). More in tune with the use of new communication technologies, the new generation born around the year 2000 spoke out online to combat the resurgence of anti-Asian racism at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is still too early to assess their mobilization, but we can already predict it will have a political impact in the years to come, as is already the case in the United States (Guzman *et al.* 2020), and we should not underestimate the influence of these mobilizations and these contexts of action in "pan-Asian" identity (Le Espiritu 1992) construction and in the building of a political force to gain influence and power within the political system. In France, drawing on online and offline ethnographic research undertaken between 2015 and 2021, Simeng Wang discusses the process of citizen identity forming and citizenship practices (participation in demonstrations and voting practices) among Chinese living in the Paris region, with a close examination of WeChat group chats. She reflects on the complexity of identity building and the multi-dimensional expression of citizenship among migrants in the digital age: WeChat plays a dual role in ethnic grouping as it unifies socially-differentiated claims for citizenship into a single "Chinese voice" while also offering a forum where class-based exclusion and discrimination within the Chinese diaspora in Paris can be disseminated (Wang 2022).

4 Historical and Doctrinal Evolution of the AJCF

As mentioned above, four former presidents of the AJCF were elected to neighborhood or municipal councils in Île-de-France. This provides us with an exemplary showcase for analyzing the political engagement and professionalization of young French people of Chinese origin. One of the vocations of the AJCF is similar to American “affirmative action” movements, such as Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), the Chinese Progressive Association and its Chinese Youth Initiative⁸ or the Asian American United,⁹ which proposes to promote community solidarity by mobilizing members against injustice and ethno-racial discrimination and to develop the democratic participation of Chinese Americans in the political decision-making process, in order to strengthen the collective power of the community (Kurashige 2000).

The testimony of Julien is very explicit on this subject. Julien was born in France, he is 25 years old, his parents arrived from the Wenzhou region through clandestine channels in the early nineties. He is currently president of the AJCF.

Julien: “Today I’m ... I think I’m a bit more aware and by being president of the association, I necessarily encourage people to go and vote and exercise their right to vote because it’s a way of expressing and defending their interests. As an association, we have to help the new generations to realize that voting is important and that we have to make our voices heard in the elections” (interview conducted in April 2022).

The AJCF was born in 2009 from the encounter of young people of the 1.5 generation in a Facebook Wenzhou community group. Still heavily influenced by their primary political socialization with their grandparents and in Chinese schools in the context of an authoritarian and nationalist regime, they felt, in 2008, the same resentment toward the way the media in France treated the Olympic Games in Beijing, its strong focus on the issue of Tibetan independence. Moreover, they were aware of the inability of first-generation migrants’ associations to defend the Chinese community due to their lack of visibility and recognition in the public space.

Marc: “In this group, there were quite a few people who wanted to ... in fact who had made an observation. The observation was that in France, in 2008, around the Beijing games, there was a lot of denigration of China in the media; and of course, this had repercussions on the Chinese community in France” (interview conducted in March 2022).

8 <https://cpaboston.org/en/programs/chinese-youth-initiative>.

9 <https://aaunited.org/>.

Indeed, the commercial associations of first-generation migrants usually had distant, even conflicting, relations with the local authorities at the time. It is important to point out that many of the first-generation Wenzhou traders were still patriotic, nationalistic, and under the control of the Chinese government. Most of these associations were to some extent under the aegis of the Chinese Embassy in a sort of patronage. Nowadays, senior dignitaries from the Chinese Embassy in France are regularly invited to investitures in these associations.

Since then, the AJCF has occupied a special place in this associative network and it is on the occasion of two significant events in the history of the Chinese community, in 2010 and 2011, that the AJCF distinguished itself, in particular thanks to the actions carried out by the descendants maintaining an increasingly distanced relationship with the Chinese authorities and initiating dialogue with their French counterparts.

“Saving our hero A-Wu.” It all really started on 1 June 2010 after a fight with a group of North Africans from the Belleville district of Paris. That evening, following the theft of a handbag, A-Wu, an individual of Chinese nationality, fired a pistol at his attackers. Claiming that insecurity was an experience shared by the Chinese community in relation to other communities, a demonstration was organized by the merchants’ associations of first-generation migrants. Initially perceived by the local authorities (City Hall, Police Headquarters) as the echo of an inter-ethnic confrontation between the Chinese community and the North African community, the demonstration ended in clashes between demonstrators and the police. Members of the AJCF were present at this first demonstration, but it was during a second one, organized in 2011 following another act of aggression, also in the Belleville district, that the AJCF asserted itself vis-à-vis associations of first-generation migrants and imposed itself as a credible partner in the eyes of local authorities. Marc, president of the association at the time, was also appointed spokesperson of the demonstration. Through its discourse, the AJCF made the messages conveyed by the demonstrators more audible, and finally succeeded in modifying the communitarian¹⁰ image of the demonstration by giving it a much more “republican”¹¹ character.

10 This idea is defined by the Robert dictionary as “A tendency to make the specificities of a community or of several communities (ethnic, religious, cultural, social ...) prevail within a broader social group.”

11 In accordance with the ideals of equality, public order and centralization proper to the French conception of the republic.

Still nowadays, the AJCF cannot be considered as an anti-racist association in the strict sense of the word despite the important role it has played in the history of the anti-racist struggle in the Chinese community. The AJCF is above all a way for these children of first-generation migrants to meet people who share similar migratory routes. It offers its members the opportunity to share their experiences with others, and to free up their voices. The AJCF allows these young adults to create a common history, to invent a common narrative and to define a community of destiny. It presents itself today as an association whose objectives are to promote spaces for discussion and exchange around the Franco-Chinese identity; to learn about and promote Chinese culture in France through projects and events; to commemorate and tell the plural stories of Chinese immigration to France; to fight against racism and discrimination against Chinese and Asian communities in France; and to carry out preventive actions in schools and deconstruct stereotypes.

We can note that the fight against racism has played an increasingly important part in the agenda of the association, thus reflecting the evolutions in the awareness of racism and ethno-racial discrimination in the Chinese community. The most significant event of this awareness raising was undoubtedly the death, in August 2016, of Zhang Chaolin, a 49-year-old first-generation migrant worker who was attacked during a pickpocketing in the public space in the northern suburbs of Paris. During the demonstrations that followed this tragedy, the discourse of the AJCF's leaders in the face of these ethno-racial attacks was part of a security approach, as revealed by the interview of one of the founding members of the association for a Chinese television.¹² This vision was quite close to that of the collective "Security for All" (#sécuritépour-tous). We interviewed Michel, a journalist and spokesperson for the "Security for All" committee since 2016. Even though Michel is not a member of the AJCF we decided to include his case in this article because of his visibility in the French media and his significant activism within the collective "Security for All", which represents the right wing of the anti-racist struggle among the Asian communities by defending a "security" approach. Michel was born of Chinese-Cambodian parents in France in 1978. His father arrived in France in 1968 and his mother in 1970, well before the Khmer Rouge came to power in April 1975, to pursue their studies and remained in France. He grew up mainly in Paris in the XIII^e arrondissement and then in Sevrans, Seine-Saint-Denis. He

12 Interview with former president of the AJCF, currently municipal councilor in the left-wing coalition in Pantin, for the Chinese channel NTDTV (5'58"). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmaBpv3clDw>.

studied law. He was a municipal councilor of Mitry-Mory from 2012 to 2016 on the list of “Les Républicains”.¹³

Michel: “My involvement in associations, the trigger, is really the murder of Zhang Chaolin in 2016 and my trip to Cambodia, those were the two triggering events in my life, more than anything related to China. ... As I haven’t set foot there. So I launched a petition to raise awareness. So for the petition, I addressed it to the President of the Republic, François Hollande, and to the Prime Minister, Manuel Valls; I launched this petition to denounce the omerta, in fact, of the public authorities. And then I met activists like me from anti-racist circles” (interview conducted in December 2021).

#SecurityforAll, oriented to the right of the political spectrum, emanating from the associations of merchants of Aubervilliers, denounced the climate of fear and insecurity that reigns in this municipality of Île-de-France, blamed the authorities and called for more security responses (increase in the number of police forces, deployment of video-surveillance cameras, etc.). In a different way, the discourse of the AJCF and claims have evolved in recent years: to the claims of better security in certain urban areas was added a fight against racism and discrimination (Wang et Madrisotti 2021). For example, one of the actions carried out by the AJCF is “Education and Prevention” in schools. This project, supported by the Interministerial Delegation for the Fight Against Racism, Anti-Semitism and Anti-LGBT Hate (DILCRAH), consists of organizing debates with pupils in classrooms on Chinese migratory history, or supervising “Memorial Walks” in the “Chinatown” of the XIII^e arrondissement in Paris.

In 2019 a trial¹⁴ against three individuals given heavy sentences for a series of pickpocketing offences targeted mainly at Chinese women was opened. The International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism (Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l’Antisémitisme), SOS Racism (SOS Racisme) and the Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l’Amitié entre les Peuples) denounced, as if in a single voice, racist acts for this trial, whereas the AJCF had not been able to join the complaint. The AJCF finally decided to change its statutes in 2020, in order to include the fight against racism and discrimination which were not included in the first statutes of the association, in order to be able to legitimately be a civil party in trials for racist aggressions.

13 Les Républicains is a French political party from the right and center, founded in 2015. It is traditionally conservative on economic and social issues, and favors authority and security order.

14 *Le Parisien*, “Île-de-France: prison for those who beat and robbed people of Asian origin,” May 16, 2020 <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/aggression-contre-des-asiatiques-en-ile-de-france-prison-ferme-pour-les-voleurs-16-05-2020-8318184.php>.

This trend toward becoming increasingly engaged in the fight against racism and discrimination accelerated at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the process of racialization of the disease (Wang et al. 2021). This new generation of French activists of Asian origin wants to voice and denounce racism, unlike their first-generation migrant parents who, for various reasons, suffered racism without being able or wanting to express themselves (Wang et al. 2022).

The change in the statutes of the AJCF finally allowed it, in March 2021, to file a civil action in a trial against five defendants judged for incitement to anti-Asian racial hatred on Twitter (Wang 2022). Moreover this trial was eagerly awaited by all the associations fighting against racism as it was one of the first of its kind under the new law against racist content on the Internet, one of the key measures announced by the French government in 2018, during the presentation of the executive plan against racism and anti-semitism. In this context, the AJCF has gradually gained credibility with the authorities, not only locally in the Paris region but also nationally. The association was invited to speak at a roundtable discussion alongside other associations as part of the “Information Mission on the emergence and evolution of different forms of racism” organized at the National Assembly in September 2020.¹⁵

Another important evolution of the AJCF is its relationship with the merchants’ associations of first-generation migrants, led by “the parents.” The latter did not pay much attention to this association of “young people.” The AJCF was not part of the institutional landscape of Chinese associations in Paris, largely due to the conservative nature of these associations and their members, as well as their patriarchal and Confucian tradition which can sometimes impede their ability to listen to and empathize with the youth. However, this Chinese association network has profoundly changed its relationship with the AJCF over the past few years. By now, the merchants’ associations of first-generation migrants even encourage its actions.

5 The AJCF, a Springboard for Political Professionalization

The processes of professionalization of political parties have devalued disinterested militancy, that of those former militants who only expected “symbolic rewards” in return for their engagement and their political activity – the construction of a rewarding identity for oneself and for others, the recognition

¹⁵ Report n°26, “Mission d’information sur l’émergence et l’évolution des différentes formes de racisme et les réponses qui y sont apportées,” National Assembly, September 17, 2020.

of invisible skills, or even the pleasures of collective action – (Gaxie 1978). Nowadays members should be considered auxiliaries to political professionals who have had, for the most part, political training in an academic setting. They are mainly recruited from the upper classes and are ultimately not very representative of the French population. Young people, racialized people and members of the working classes are relatively few in number. Despite promises for change, inertia persists (Fretel 2017). In addition, political party leaders are also concerned that the balance of forces within their movement will be destabilized by the entry of outsiders.

After having noted the lack of representativeness and diversity of the French political world, it is clear that there are nevertheless opportunities, mainly at the local level, for a renewal of the political landscape. Indeed, contrary to what we can observe at the national level, or even within the headquarters of the major political parties, municipal councils do offer entry points for outsiders to the political profession, at the end of a process in which associative activism is one of the driving forces. As a matter of fact, for several years in France, this particularistic treatment of activists from ethnic minorities and considered as community representatives is increasingly constituting for political parties “a new imposed figure of French politics” (Geisser and Soum 2008) and even more so since its theorization by the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who created within his political party a “national secretariat for diversity” in 2007 and presented a political project during the electoral campaign titled “diversity, a wealth of opportunity for French identity”.¹⁶

The promotion of diversity in politics raises, in France and in Western democracies, many debates, which are essentially ideological. It questions the relationship between the representatives and the represented. As far as France is concerned, let us first recall that the integrationist and universalist republican paradigm, rejecting “the mosaic model” (Ceyhan 1993), is “reluctant to recognize the membership of the individual to a group” (Simon and Escafré-Dublet 2009) and does not favor, contrary to Anglo-Saxon countries, the representation of populations of immigrant origin as such in the political space. Indeed, if we take the example of the United States, the American electoral system, which is more open to atypical candidates, clearly facilitates the election of new entrants. These characteristics make it relatively easier for immigrants to enter politics in the United States (Mollenkopf and Hochschild 2010). From the French perspective, this multicultural model, described as

16 *Le Monde*, “Les minorités visibles de l’UMP entendent ouvrir le débat sur la diversité,” Laetitia Van Eeckhout, published on April 10, 2007.

communitarian¹⁷ by advocates of republican integration, risks pushing ethnic minorities into separate communities, “in the sense of a dynamic of fragmentation” (Ceyhan 1993).

For the founding members of the AJCF, the “Chinese demonstrations,” organized in 2010 and 2011 were, in a way, a baptism of fire. And perhaps even more so in 2016, when Eric, co-founder of the AJCF, responded to a journalist from *Les Inrockuptibles* as a figure of the Chinese youth uprising against insecurity and pointed out their lack of political experience: “we have not prepared a concrete and negotiated step plan with the local authorities, we are not used to militantism and politics, but we have set this imperative: that our demands be realized before the end of the year” (Auproux 2016). We are tempted to affirm that this associative commitment in action has been one of the pillars of their political socialization. During this movement organized by multiple associations, they were able to discover the world of the media, meet local authorities, but above all learn about power and leadership relationships.

As part of their actions against racism, as well as in their prevention missions within the French educational system, the AJCF leaders have been, as we pointed out previously, in direct contact with public policy officials. The AJCF then found itself confronted with an ever-increasing need to professionalize its leaders. Similarly, by getting involved in legal proceedings as a plaintiff in trials of racially motivated attacks, it has had to acquire the necessary legal tools. Since 2012, the AJCF has thus also been in close contact with other older associations, specialized in the fight against racism, such as SOS Racisme, and has benefited from their experience and their network. These collaborations began with the “l’affaire du Point” (*Le Monde* with AFP 2014), when the editor of a weekly magazine was fined one thousand five hundred euros for defaming Chinese immigrants in France. The AJCF is therefore a formidable political training organization. It allows its members, in particular its leaders, to acquire various tools that are essential to a political career: the ability to express oneself in public or in front of the media, the understanding of power relationships and a better knowledge of political issues.

There are countless articles or portraits of AJCF leaders in the media, especially when the news reminds us of the racism that Asians can sometimes face. Many French media outlets, including *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Les Inrockuptibles*, and various television channels, have all interviewed an AJCF leader at least once. During these multiple encounters with journalists, these young activists

17 This idea is defined by the Robert dictionary as “A tendency to make the specificities of a community or of several communities (ethnic, religious, cultural, social ...) prevail within a broader social group.”

were trained in the field of political discourse. They developed language elements and made their way into political-media networks through the back door. Indeed, the fights led by this association allowed them to create special relationships with local political actors, and offered the possibility of an accumulation of real political capital and the constitution of an individual notoriety, which are all essential components of a political career, as Olivier, current president of the AJCF since 2020, explained to us. His speech summarizes quite well the beginning of this process of political commitment within an association like the AJCF.

Olivier: “I meet more and more political actors who are from different political sides. People who were campaigning for Pécresse but also other people for Macron. ... I think that the fact of having this kind of encounter and myself being confronted with this environment makes me. ... Perhaps this tells me that. ... Especially as an association, we have to help the new generations to say that voting is important and that we have to carry our voice through the elections” (interview conducted in April 2022).

Indeed, as Eric Kerrouche and Anne-Sophie Behm state: “an electoral career begins with the possibility of being recognized as eligible, that is, being considered as someone with personal resources that can be converted into the political arena and involved in the various territorialized social networks” (Kerrouche and Behm 2013). When municipal teams draw up their lists for upcoming elections, after having offered places to political professionals who are members of their party, they have always drawn from the pool of associations in their municipality. For this reason, exercising responsibilities within an association recognized at the local level constitutes an important advantage. Almost all of the political actors we met have been engaged in associations, mainly the AJCF, but also within commercial associations such as those in Aubervilliers, which initiated the organization of the Sécurité Pour Tous committee.

The case of Marc, former president of the AJCF, is exemplary in this respect. Following the demonstrations in the Belleville district in 2011, the left-wing municipal team of the XIX^e arrondissement felt the need to include an Asian face in its campaign team. As a result of the political capital acquired by Marc during this movement, the city hall of the XX^e arrondissement, with which he was in contact through his associative activity, recommended him to the future mayor who was campaigning for the municipal elections of the XIX^e arrondissement of Paris so that he could appear on its list in 2014.

Marc: “Thanks to the AJCF for getting me in touch with local politicians, in particular at the city hall of Paris. This is where I had the opportunity to meet those people. I was spokesperson for the demonstration in 2011. In 2013, when

the lists were drawn up for the 2014 municipal elections, the XIX^e arrondissement city hall wanted to have an Asian face, an Asian person on the list. They passed on this information, they met a lot of people: I was contacted ..." (interview conducted in March 2022).

Similarly, it was the associative commitment of another AJCF president, Jean, that allowed him to be identified as a potential candidate for the 2020 municipal elections. Jean's experience is extremely interesting in order to understand what is at stake when political actors put together their lists for municipal elections. It was Buon Tan, a Teochew community political figure in Paris, who first encouraged him to enter politics.

Jean: "For me, the big trigger, because at the beginning I wanted to remain in the associative field, I did not want to go into politics, it was during a festive evening, during a basketball game of the team of Paris of the XIII^e arrondissement ... well ... there I met Buon Tan, who is part of the network, whom we know well and at that time he was a Member of Parliament and he said to me: Jean, you should enter politics because there are not many young people like you, who have this competence, this mastery of the problems that concern the community, and it would be good if you entered politics" (interview conducted in October 2021).

After a long period of procrastination, Jean, also from the Teochew community, finally decided not to join the teams of the "République en Marche" party in the XIX^e arrondissement as was offered to him by Buon Tan, for reasons of political positioning and community belonging, knowing that the Chinese community of the XIX^e arrondissement is mostly composed of Wenzhouese. At the same time, the mayor's chief of staff called a member of an association of Asian merchants in the XIII^e arrondissement to tell him that they would need someone to act as a link with the Asian communities. It was to replace this same Buon Tan, because of his election as Member of Parliament on the "République en Marche" party list, and who, in fact, was no longer part of the municipal majority. It is this association leader who had advised Jean, in whom he saw the ideal profile.

However it is interesting to note that these two associative actors preferred to register with no political party affiliation within their respective local executive, thus claiming not to be locked in the party system, and asserting a certain pragmatism. This pragmatism can be attributed, in large part, to their positioning with regard to the security theme. Faced with the feeling of insecurity that a part of the French population, and in particular the members of the Chinese community, may experience, this theme goes far beyond the left-right divide among these elected officials. Among the electorate of Asian origin, on the left as well as on the right, there is a very strong demand for security. As a point

of comparison,¹⁸ naturalized French citizens of North Africa or Sub-Saharan African origin exhibit "political orientation," which can be defined as "the set of values, norms and preferences (in short, the ideology) that guides or structures individuals toward a political party or camp" (Tiberj 2018: 109), which is clearly left-wing and driven by both the racial discrimination prevalent in France and a sociotropic mindset centered around defending one's community. This is comparable to that of African-Americans within the Democratic Party (Tiberj 2015).

For Eric, another former president of the AJCF, it is the political capital accrued by his engagement in the "Place Publique" party,¹⁹ itself directly linked to his associative engagement, that played a role in his designation as a possible candidate on the "L'Avenir en Commun"²⁰ platform. Being part of what is commonly now called "visible minorities" (Bird 2005), a Canadian sociological concept recently imported into France, was also for him, an additional factor in the choice of those who drew up the list of candidates.

Eric: "As regards my place on the electoral list for the municipal elections of the city of Pantin in 2020, it was natural. First of all, I was one of the founders of "Place Publique," I was Chinese, I had a different color, I was an associative activist, I was Googlisable, I already had things to my credit. I was already recognized in the 93rd department, I already knew people. The other activists trusted me and told me: go ahead! In Pantin, among the activists of "Place Publique," I was the one who ticked the most boxes to go there" (interview conducted in February 2022).

In these neighborhoods with a large population of Chinese origin, the local political parties consider the AJCF leaders to be privileged partners, figures of leadership and notability in the Chinese community present on the territory. These associative actors are endowed, by these parties, with a supposed form of legitimacy to represent the members of this community, while being able to play the role of interface and mediation with the public authorities. The French of Chinese origin, this fraction of the electorate, real or potential, is considered as an area of potential political conquest by these political parties in electoral campaigns. However, while in city councils, and particularly

18 Knowing that French citizens of foreign origin residing in France have been largely overlooked in electoral studies (Tiberj 2007).

19 The party "Place Publique" created in 2018, located on the left, presents itself as a progressive and environmentalist citizen movement around four economic and social, ecological, democratic and European imperatives.

20 "L'Avenir en Commun" is a political platform led by Anne Hidalgo, the current mayor of Paris. It is focused on progressive policies and aims to promote social and environmental justice, as well as greater democracy and transparency in government.

in urban areas, mayors must govern with a range of specialized leaders who represent different ethnic or social groups, these practices, which are a form of “identity targeting of local electorates,” can also be seen by some as the flip side of promoting diversity in politics (Geisser 2007).

6 Conclusion and Future Perspectives

While the AJCF is not the most radical association in the fight against anti-Asian racism, it is considered the most important and the most recognized by a range of actors, whether political, legal or media. As we have suggested, the role of certain events that played a part in awareness-raising regarding racism are part of the drivers of the racial and political socialization and political engagement of its members. The evolution of the AJCF’s doctrine appears to have been marked by a succession of paroxysmal moments of anti-Asian racism in France during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the fight against racism and discrimination was not its main purpose when it was founded, the AJCF has been, in recent years, in all the battles to defend these victims. We can also affirm that this fight against racism and racial discrimination within the AJCF has encouraged its leader to participate in political decision-making, in order to reinforce the collective power of the community.

Hence, while the AJCF wishes to appear primarily in the public space as an affinity association of interpersonal encounters with the objective of mutual aid and support in intercultural situations, it has also developed, through its political actions, an expertise in power relations, which is important for understanding how systems of discrimination and racial inequality are maintained and perpetuated, and for working toward social change.

Its multiple interactions with local and national authorities and the media have contributed to the formation of a political elite recognized by a part of the Asian communities. Considered by the public authorities as a channel of communication between the State and this Asian communities, the AJCF participates, on its own scale, in local debate and takes part in local decision-making processes. We have shown how the exercise of a leadership mandate within the AJCF has allowed almost all its successive presidents to establish relationships in the political and media network and also with first-generation migrant’s associations previously settled.

Their entry into the political arena leads us to formulate the question of Asian ethnicity as a political resource that can be mobilized in the conquest of power in the form of ethnic clientelism. However, can we really consider these French people of Chinese origin, eager to integrate into the political sphere in

the name of "representation-representativity" and diversity, as the true representatives of their supposed community?

Those questions seem to reveal a paradox. These elected officials regularly claim they are elected with no intention to represent particular categories of the electorate. Yet, it is as a "visible minority" that they were recruited to fulfill this elected position. These representatives of the Chinese community in France, more or less self-proclaimed, or recognized as such by community economic interest groups and political parties, could tend to form an "ethnic elite" (Martiniello 1994) of which an unacknowledged function could be a form of community-based lobbying (Geisser 2007), particularly with regard to the relationship between the political system and economic power. It would therefore be possible to imagine that the benefits of their elected status and the possible political excesses inherent in "the political profession"²¹ (Offerlé 1999) could lead to the temptation of individual upward social mobility by considering their mandate as the means to acquire individual or network privileges, or as a stepping stone toward a professional career, and finally compromise their role as spokespersons for the community of citizens they are supposed to represent.

These last remarks open up perspectives for research on the exercise of the political profession by this new generation of French political actors of Chinese origin. How do these elected officials who represent ethnic diversity practice politics in France post-Covid-19? It would be interesting, for example, to shed light on all concrete practices of these elected officials within local governments in their areas of competence during their terms in office. This analysis of the local political profession could focus on their different modes of political legitimization, their symbolic actions, development programs and public policies aimed at their constituents of Asian origin to offer them a sense of belonging to the territory. At a national level, it could be valuable to compare the efforts of the AJCF in combating racism to other smaller associations recently emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic in France. Such a comparison could shed light on the possibility of synergies in their political engagement. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to compare the anti-racist and social civic associations (such as the AJCF) in France with those embedded in other European countries, in which civic and political activities are also professionalized and might aim to a more prominent social presence of Chinese diasporas in Europe.

21 "When we talk about political profession, it is to emphasize the perennial character of their activity, and the necessity for the candidates to the political profession, to begin early their entry and their career to hope to integrate the highest levels of the hierarchy."

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