

CHINESE MIGRANTS AND COVID-19: MOBILITY AND EXCLUSION IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

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Mobility, pandemic and exclusion

- Tim Cresswell (2006):

“Mobility is both the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to undo it.”

- Marie-Claire Foblets et al (2018):

“Migrants are not excluded at all times with the same intensity; there are rather particular moments when acts of exclusion are more accentuated.”

Mobility, pandemic and exclusion

- Exclusion:

“Attitudes and acts that hinder access to various material and immaterial resources and to deny, limit or challenge membership and participation in a social group (Foblets et al, 2018).”

- Various conceptualization of exclusion: racism, stigma, (class-based and status) prejudice
- Aim of the paper: to highlight various cases of exclusion not only at one end of the migration process between China and Europe, but rather in its various locations along the way – in the countries of settlement, country of origin as well as within the transnational communities that are formed by Chinese migrants.

“I am not a virus, I am a person” – Racism towards Asians in Europe

- Racist instances: acts threatening the economic survival of Chinese migrants (e.g. shunning Chinese restaurants and shops and occasionally their destruction) and the acts that threaten the physical safety and wellbeing of migrants (physical attacks, physical avoidance, verbal attacks, incitement to racial hatred).



“I am not a virus, I am a person” – Racism towards Asians in Europe

- Racism was not targeting only Chinese, but all people who look visually different, especially if perceived as Asians. They were victims of attacks, regardless of their citizenship, country of domicile, their ethnic identity...
- Examples: physical attack on Filipina mistaken to be Chinese in Rome, Vietnamese curator steps down in London not to “scare” people, vandalization of Japanese restaurants...

“I am not a virus, I am a person” – Racism towards Asians in Europe

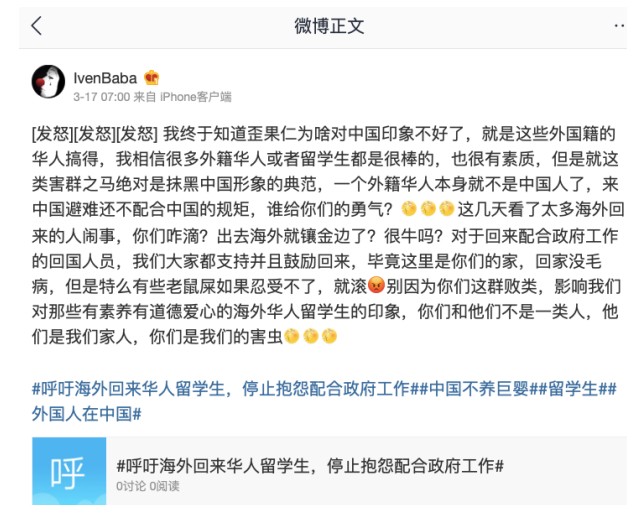
- Reactions: “I am not a virus” campaign, support for local Chinese restaurants and shops, cooperation among Chinese migrants and local governments



“China will not care for giant babies” – Chinese migrants’ return home

- Netizens’ outrage targets returnees:

“... Chinese without the citizenship is not a Chinese anymore, to come back to China to avoid problems is not in line with the rules in China, where do you get the courage? I have seen far too many returnees in the last two days who bring troubles, what are you doing? Was tlife abroad laid with roses? Was it great? Those among you who respect the rules we support and encourage to return. This is after all your home and there are no problems there... But I cannot stand those rotten apples... Disappear! You garbage have damage the reputation of moral and patriotic overseas Chinese and overseas students...You and they are not the same species, they are my compatriots, and you are our pest..” (IvenBaba on Weibo, 17.3.2020)



“China will not care for giant babies” – Chinese migrants’ return home

- The students’ reaction:

“... We have the right to return to our country. Working or studying abroad does not mean renouncing one’s citizenship. Perhaps netizens do not understand that no matter how long you study abroad, you are still Chinese citizen. Here are our families and friends and our passport is Chinese. We have the same rights and duties as every Chinese. And if you wish to return, you do not need the permission of the netizens (*Liu xuesheng ribao, 2020*).”

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The term “giant babies” comes from the book *State of the giant babies* by a psychologist Wu Zhihong. He claims that many young Chinese personal development nowadays does not evolve into autonomous persons but rather remain on the level of children’ perceptions of the world, especially by understanding world in only black and white terms. The terms is often used online for describing demanding, self-important persons.

“If you cannot be compassionate, at least don’t do more harm” – the stigma within the transnational community

- Social stigma based on the presence of the disease: an attribute or reputation that is socially discrediting and it causes an individual to be classified by others as undesirable and tainted (Erving Goffman, 1963)
- Interviewee on protective measures and being responsible:
“While I was sitting in my car, I have seen my parents from afar how all feeble and weak struggle to carry their own luggage into the house. Nobody can understand how much I suffered and how badly I wanted to help them. I was in pain but I restrained myself. If I would go to them, then everything would be in vain (*Weicheng, 2020*).”

“If you cannot be compassionate, at least don’t do more harm” – the stigma within the transnational community

- Interviewee on stigma:

“Despite following all protective measures, we are now the victims that everybody wishes to punish. I disagree that we should feel ashamed due to the disease. I can only feel sad and desperate. Not only my family and I are affected, everybody around me is affected by this. At a moment like this everybody should look after their own health and not thinking about hurting other people. If you cannot be compassionate, at least don’t do more harm (*Weicheng 2020*).”

To conclude...

- Exclusion is still very much part of Chinese migration experience and that migrants face multiple vulnerabilities at various locations.
- Different forms of exclusion along migration path: overt racism in countries of settlement, stigma within TN community and (class-based) mobility prejudice in China.
- Continuous salience of the imaginaries of the connection between migrants and disease affecting regimes of mobility.



Author: Laika (Rome, 2020)