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CHAPTER 7

Disruption in Study Abroad during the Pandemic: Chinese Students in France

Yong Li, Ran Yan and Simeng Wang

Abstract

This chapter examines the disruptive effect of Covid-19 on different aspects of the lives of Chinese students studying in France: their studies, daily life, employment, and migratory trajectories. First, the transition to distance learning during the first phases of the pandemic had contrasting effects on the learning processes of respondents: negative for some and beneficial for others, depending on the student's field of study, level of study, and living conditions. The clearest negative effects, however, are seen with respect to their student experience, which was harmed by their inability to explore their geography and to develop social relationships with other students. Second, at a pivotal moment, recent graduates found their careers derailed by the arrival of Covid-19. The duration of this derailment depended on their training and their personal conditions, reflecting the effect of existing inequality. They developed strategies for adapting to the new conditions, which included making some concessions. Third, looking back over time enables authors to better understand the ways in which these students constructed migratory paths based on the evolution of the pandemic, by evaluating the risks and prioritizing their objectives. The health considerations that seemed overwhelming at the beginning of the pandemic gradually gave way to other, more general concerns, such as economic security, professional success, and personal independence.

Keywords

Chinese students in France – migrants – Covid-19 – pandemic – disruptive effect – study broad – experiences – training – career – inequality – living conditions – migratory trajectories – strategies – health – professional success

1 Introduction

In 2020, when Europe became the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of Chinese students in France to pursue higher education dropped 40 percent (Lenormand et al., 2021). International mobility data on Chinese students suggests that many young Chinese people postponed or changed their study-abroad plans, altering their international mobility patterns. Moreover, the pandemic had a strong impact on the lived experience of those who remained abroad for their studies.

In this chapter, we analyze that experience. We first examine Chinese students' experience in studying abroad during the pandemic—in particular, the responses, strategies, and arrangements that they developed to cope with disruption in their studies. Then, we discuss the post-graduation paths of Chinese graduates, focusing on their decisions about returning to their home countries or remaining in France.

The chapter addresses a series of questions: how did the pandemic call into question certain beliefs linked to studying abroad—for example, the goals of personal enrichment and cross-cultural exchanges? How did Chinese students adapt to the health crisis by maintaining their original goals while giving meaning to their experience in France? How the pandemic affects the mobility trajectory of students, and the migratory trajectory of those who planned to stay abroad after graduation? How did Chinese students respond to the emerging forms of studying abroad that combine spatial mobility and immobility, in-person courses, and distance learning? We also focus on the study conditions for Chinese students under the pandemic, as they are the core of their overseas experience.

We address these question in the light of a first literature stream on the impact of Covid-19 on Chinese students who went to different countries for their studies. This literature explores the identity and sense of belonging of Chinese students in a world shaken by the crisis. These works analyze the ways in which Chinese students negotiate their multiple identities (Binah-Pollak & Yuan, 2022), experience racism and Sinophobia in their host countries (Haft & Zhou, 2021), and double exclusion, in both their host country and their country of origin. The second stream of literature focuses on the subjective experience of Chinese students in their daily lives, whether they are in China or abroad. These studies focus on the temporal experience of Chinese students who pursued their international studies while remaining in China (Wang B., 2021), the perception of risk in the pandemic (Zhu et al., 2020), preventive practices, and the mental health of Chinese students during the pandemic in their host countries (Cong et al., 2020; Ma & Miller, 2021). A third stream of the literature

focuses on the role of different networks of actors in organizing the international mobility or lack thereof of Chinese students. This work emphasizes transnational family ties and the online community, which played an important role in supporting Chinese students during the public health crisis when other institutional actors ceased to function as usual. As different countries took a largely state-centered approach in tackling the pandemic, state actors are retreating from the transnational social space (Vertovec, 2009). To help Chinese youth to travel back to China or remain abroad, Chinese families are no longer content to be mere users of institutional infrastructure but, rather, proactively participate in coordinating or bridging the activities of disconnected institutions (e.g., airlines, border authorities, and commercial agents). This family-mediated infrastructure process also entails an emotional double bind, which requires members of transnational families to strategically display emotional engagement and detachment in complex ways (Hu et al., 2020).

These growing streams of literature, however, include little research that draws attention to the ways in which the pandemic affected Chinese students' study conditions. Moreover, little has been written about the ways in which Chinese students' experiences during the pandemic have affected their long-term migration plans, including their decision about whether to return to their home country. Our chapter is an attempt to fill this gap. We begin with a discussion of study abroad.

2 Studying the Diverse Experiences of Chinese Students in France during the Pandemic

China has experienced a surge in study abroad since it eased restrictions on self-funded overseas education in the 1990s (Biao, 2003). Young Chinese remain fascinated in study abroad, making China the world's largest sending country of international students. In general, study abroad combines the accumulation of cultural, symbolic, and social capital through international education that can be transformed into economic capital, in that it allows them to acquire skills that can be capitalized on the job market. Through their studies and cross-cultural experiences abroad, young Chinese also fulfill a desire to become educated, open-minded, international, and cosmopolitan. A discussion of study abroad is reminiscent of a discussion of *suzhi* (a person's good education or cultural quality), a concept that the well-connected urban middle classes in China hold dear (Hanser, 2008).

However, the pandemic has put study abroad into question at two levels. First, the public health crisis strongly disrupted students' overseas study plans.

In France, in the second semester of the 2019–2020 academic year, courses were taught online or simply canceled, exams and dissertation defenses were postponed, and conferences, workshops, and experiments disappeared from the curriculum (Belghith et al., 2020). The collective experience of young Chinese was suddenly and dramatically altered. Alain Coulon (2005) calls the "job of being a student" an affiliation that presupposes socialization and an interaction with one's social environment. Without this interaction, what remains of the student's affiliation?

Second, and more generally, since the outbreak of the pandemic, the foreign experience has lost its substance. Questions are raised about the point of going to study in France if young people are forced to be confined in their homes, deprived of cultural outings, unable to frequent bars, museums, live theaters, and movie theaters. Mobility abroad involves a hierarchy of space, endowing individuals who return to their home country with higher status because of their sojourn in places that are considered more modern (Liu, 1997; Wagner, 2007). As the pandemic raged throughout France, France was perceived as a risky country by many Chinese students and their families and the ability of the French government to contain the spread of the coronavirus was questioned. In addition, an increase in acts of anti-Asian violence as well as discourse in France occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Chapter 10). Did the pandemic experience, as well as the direct or indirect experience with racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, lead young Chinese to radically change their perceptions of France and, consequently, their own self-image and their evaluation of their experience in France?

The Chinese student population in France is heterogeneous (Li, 2020; Wang S., 2021), and so were the experiences of Chinese students during the pandemic, depending on students' field of study, level of study, and educational institution. Professional projects and housing conditions influenced students' lockdown experiences (Launay & Grossetti, 2020): for some, it was a constraint, whereas for others it was an opportunity to explore other ways of learning. Furthermore, young Chinese abroad may develop various kinds of ties with the host society, including friendship and marital, professional, and emotional relationships during their study and after their graduate, especially when they take paid work or marry the locals and move to a different legal status (Li & Wang, 2021). A study by Yang et al. (2021) on the decision of Chinese students and researchers to return to China stresses the existence of these considerations as well as the importance of health risk considerations, which kept the informants on British soil.

This chapter emphasizes the need to consider the variety of logics of action, and their intersection, to understand the decision-making processes of Chinese

students and graduates in France regarding their decision to remain there or return to their country of origin. The research sample consists of Chinese students currently enrolled in the French system of higher education, as well as graduates, who completed their university studies in France in 2020 and 2021. These two graduating classes are the first to make decisions about work, further study, and migration in the context of Covid-19. We interviewed a total of seven men and fifteen women. Most of these interviewees has participated in the MigraChiCovid survey (online questionnaire, interview), except three (Alice, Emma, Tom) who are recruited and interviewed by the second author through her personal networks. Although there is an overrepresentation in our sample of students in the social sciences and the humanities and graduates of Sciences Po (*Institut d'Etudes Politiques*, IEP), the profiles of our respondents vary enough to show the diversity of student conditions and experiences during the pandemic. Our respondents are between twenty-one and thirty-three years old. Most of them arrived in France at the end of the 2010s and paid for their studies themselves. Most of them are also graduate students (see the interviewees' sociodemographic characteristics in Appendix Table 7.1). Because of the practical constraints on meeting in person in the context of the pandemic, many of our interviews were conducted remotely, either by phone or via WeChat, a social networking platform.

Our study also pays particular attention to the temporal dimension of Chinese students' experiences during the pandemic. As Bingyu Wang (2021, 2022) notes, international study applicants who expected to enroll at universities abroad in 2020 were forced to remain in China. She shows that while staying put in China they encountered a series of temporal disruptions in both everyday life and their future plans. Her work demonstrates that the loss of routine, experience with stasis, and temporal dissonance with their peers all generated anxiety for the young Chinese she studied. This anxiety was exacerbated by the fact that progress in their future plans was affected by the pandemic. In France, the VICO survey shows that the restrictions imposed in the spring of 2020 led not only changes in the French people's relationship with time but also revealed and even accentuated social inequality among the French population in the dealing with time. More than the usual time, the temporal experience of the French is polarized according to their sociodemographic characteristics during the lockdown: some feel as if they don't have enough time, and others feel that the pace of life is slower (Paye, 2020). We therefore adopt a temporally sensitive approach in our study on the experience of Chinese students and graduates in France. Students' temporal experience must be understood in light of the life-course transitions that they experienced during their stay abroad. Their temporal experience must also be situated within the period

of the pandemic. At each stage in the pandemic's evolution, young Chinese experienced different feelings and emotions, at different intensities, linked to different concerns—for example, the acute fear of infection in February and March 2020 transitioned to concern about their future, during the "return to normal" in the summer of 2020. Our empirical material, which covers from May 2020 to the end of 2021, enables us to step back and understand the trajectories of our respondents, and how certain social logics resisted the global upheavals caused by Covid-19.

3 Studying during Covid-19: Impacts and Adaptation

3.1 *Freedom of Movement between Home and Host Countries and Reorganization of the Curriculum*

In February and March 2020, because of the increase in Covid-19 infections in France as well as other European countries, Chinese students who were studying abroad faced the difficult decision of whether to return to their home country to avoid infection. Many rushed to return to China, where they were perceived as disease spreaders and sometimes suffered from feelings of exclusion. But it would be simplistic to describe these decisions to return home as the result of a collective panic. Our respondents who returned to China at the beginning of the pandemic did not always experience the return as traumatic. On the contrary, it was an opportunity to develop a new way of learning, which enabled them to reconcile health considerations and their professional projects, while remaining close to their family.

In March 2020, after the announcement of the lockdown in France, Tom, a master's-degree student at School of Knowledge Economy and Management (SKEMA) Business School (Paris) decided to return to China. Living with his parents, he participated in courses remotely for a month before finding a place at the Suzhou campus of SKEMA in August. He told us:

> There is no option for my master's degree (in international human resources and performance management) at the Chinese campus, so I had to change my major, but I still prefer to remain in China. In fact, my school offered me three options: remain at the Paris campus, transfer to the Chinese campus, or take the courses online. I chose the second one. It was a decision made in consultation with my family. It is mainly for health reasons, but it is also linked to my professional plans. If it were not for Covid-19, I would have stayed in Paris.
>
> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

Many young Chinese at French schools that offered "off-campus" training chose to relocate to Chinese campuses. Tom notes that about thirty Chinese students in his master's-degree program made the same choice.

Another remarkable fact is that returning to China during Covid-19 is often thought of as temporary. By returning, some Chinese students were bowing to parental pressure, but they have not given up their plans to study abroad. This is the case for Alice, who finished her bachelor's degree in international commerce at the ESCE Business School in July 2020. She would have started her master's degree at the same school in September, but she gave in to parental pressure by asking for a gap year.

> At first, I didn't want to lose a year. I already lost two months during the lockdown, when online classes were poorly organized. But my parents begged me to stay in China. When I read the figures published every day on the number of infected people in France, I was finally "defeated by reality."
>
> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

However, Alice planned to be vaccinated in China and resume her studies in Paris, and after a year in China, she returned to Paris in September 2021 to pursue her master's degree at the same school. Since May 2020, French higher education institutions, including the *grandes écoles,* have offered international students incentives for returning to the campus (Lombard-Latune, 2020). However, as shown below, because of the resurgence of the pandemic in Europe and the tightening of border controls at that time, resuming studies in Europe was not always easy.

Nonetheless, despite the outbreak of the public health crisis in France, most Chinese students remained in France to pursue their education. With the introduction of lockdowns and curfews, young Chinese experienced the loss of their usual reference points and were forced to adapt to new norms, such as social distancing and restrictions on travel. The narratives of our respondents differ based on their education background, their personal situation, and their migration plans.

The transition to online education, for example, was organized very differently at *grandes écoles* and universities. At the *grandes écoles*, such as Sciences Po, online teaching was set up very quickly, with students receiving prompt instructions and directions. Zoom accounts were set up for Sciences Po students two days after the French government announced a national lockdown. Students reported few technical difficulties in continuing their studies. Unlike the elite schools, French public universities struggled to adopt online

education after the lockdown began, which greatly disrupted the learning process for some students. Yan, a twenty-six-year-old master's-degree student in sociology at a public university in Montpellier, did not have any classes for four months. The experience of having her education disrupted led her to have doubts about the academic value of her diploma.

> During the lockdown, my school was closed, and we didn't have any online software to attend class. The teacher emailed us some PowerPoints to read, but there were no classes. In September 2020, we switched to half online and half offline, but the online teachers occasionally canceled classes because of technical problems, and I don't have any confidence in my diploma even though I've now graduated and have a master's degree.
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, SEPTEMBER 2020 AND DECEMBER 2021

The move to online education can have a significant impact on efficiency, outcomes, learning motivation, and educational relationships (Bès & Demonsant, 2020). This is especially true for science and engineering students. Lily, an engineering student, had numerous negative effects of Covid-19 on her studies. First, normally, engineering students have a lot of practical experience, which enables students to use the knowledge learned through in-class experiments and to understand its concrete applications in social practices and production. Because of the pandemic, all laboratory experiments were canceled. Lily, like her classmates, had to write reports based on existing experimental materials. The inability to get their hands on the tools and materials for experimentation not only reduces students' productivity—it took Lily more time than usual to complete a report—but also affects the development of practical engineering skills. Lily said: "Our knowledge is limited to theory. This is not good for an engineering education" (interview conducted in Chinese, February 2022). Second, unlike business or humanities students, whose courses are based on PowerPoint presentations, engineering students need the equations and graphs that their professors write on the board to better understand the course materials. They are deprived of this form of interaction if courses are taught on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Lily reported difficulty in understanding her professors, who had no experience in teaching online courses. When she missed certain technical terms, Lily did not dare to interrupt her teacher, nor could she ask her classmates for help. Deprived of contact with her French classmates, Lily could only do group work with her Chinese classmates. For these reasons, Lily became unmotivated during the pandemic. She was not accustomed to working independently. Without having a teacher's supervision, she had difficulty

concentrating on her studies. During the online classes, she often did other things.

Among humanities and social science students, reactions to the pandemic were mixed. Social distancing and travel restrictions prevented social science students from conducting fieldwork or forced them to opt for virtual encounters, which greatly reduces the potential for finding respondents and building strong relationships with interlocutors. Sarah (28, PhD student in sociology) stated:

> Yes, the pandemic has had an impact on my studies. Before, when I wanted to do an interview, it was in person, just like now: real people to real people. But [during Covid], I was restricted from going out and had to work online, so some of the interviews that I had scheduled earlier were canceled. The people whom we interview online now were all recommended by other people from the previous face-to-face meetings; it is more difficult to get more recommendations for online subjects. In other words, it is more difficult to find new interviewees. After all, the trust that you build through an in-person relationship is different from the feeling in virtual space. In particular, when it comes to more personal information, it's much more reassuring to talk face-to-face.
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JULY 2020

The most advanced students in their studies, for example, doctoral students, found that, aside from the constraints of accessing the field, their greatest difficulty was the inability to participate in conferences, especially those outside France, as this is a central part of their academic socialization and intellectual identity. Bing, a PhD student in sociology, did not participate in conferences in person for two years. He was ironic:

> The biggest impact of the epidemic on my studies was that I did not have the usual habit of attending many conferences, and I gave up some preparatory work before my PhD studies. I often laughed at myself for being a PhD during the pandemic. In fact, many other students I know did suffer greatly, particularly in terms of the frequency and effectiveness of communication with supervisors, participation in academic seminars and socializing with colleagues, etc.
>
> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, JANUARY 2022

But, as mentioned earlier, the effects of the pandemic were not completely negative. Going online had some benefits for students who prefer written rather than oral communication. This is the case for Fei, a twenty-four-year-old

sociology student at the Sorbonne, who had to write her master's research report with her French classmates. Because she is not a native French speaker, face-to-face discussion with her French colleagues is stressful for her, and taking notes is not easy. Having online meetings and working on a Google Doc enabled her to follow the discussions more easily and make better contributions to collective work.

Students whose training requires more introspection and independent work than data collection and contact with physical reality were hardly affected by the lockdowns. For example, Feng, a twenty-five-year-old student in a master's program in communication and translation in Paris, found studying at home more convenient than going to the school.

> I think the future of translation and interpretation might be more online, so we have a chance to try it out and see how to do it later. I think it's normal to have more time for your own academic research, but I think I need more time to do what I want to do at home and learn to do what I want to do. For example, I also learned something new; I took classes on an online learning platform called Coursera and earned two certificates. When I had to go to the school, I wasted time commuting, so it was better to study at home because I had more time.
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

During Covid-19, the sudden shift to distance learning was accompanied by significant changes in students' relationship to knowledge: rules became more blurred, and success depended more on individual autonomy. But the public health crisis also had a tremendous impact on the daily lives of young Chinese people and their relationships to others.

3.2 *Life during Covid—Emotions, Social Ties, and Temporal Experiences*

The students interviewed all experienced a loss of human contact with the living society: this included outings, meetings, trips, parties, and celebrations, making for a solitary student experience. Although Wenxi (twenty-five, arrived in France in 2014) thought her online courses at Sciences Po went quite well, she still felt as if something was lacking and missed being able to wear her nice clothes to school and greet her teachers and classmates. Her biggest regret was in being unable to celebrate the end of her master's degree with her classmates. "We said goodbye to each other when we turned off the camera. Nothing special happened that day" (Interview conducted in Chinese, February 2022).

Student life was further complicated by the fact that students had taken care of themselves during an unprecedented health crisis (Belghith et al., 2021). The hardest part was organizing their lives outside classes: those who

lived alone described a heavy atmosphere. Many told us about their experience in dealing with moods, stress, and fear. Some saw their student life reduced to monotony, in a little studio. Wenxi confided, "In my whole life, I have never spent so long alone in 16 square meters. There is a tree in front of my window. Every day I took a picture of it. In a few months, the tree, which was bare in winter, became very leafy in summer." Social isolation can greatly affect the motivation of young migrants, as well as their physical and mental health. Meng is a twenty-four-year-old studying film directing in Paris. She lives alone in a studio in Versailles. She describes her neighborhood as "very calm" and inhabited mostly by elderly French people. During the lockdown, she was alone in her studio: "I barely spoke for about two months, not even much Chinese. I felt as if I was in a state of aphasia."

In this context, we observed a tightening of existing family and friendship ties during the lockdowns, perhaps to fill this social and emotional void. Those who were close became distant, and those who were distant became close. Some students got back in touch with former classmates in China and their friends in other foreign countries. Wenxi, who is very social, could only rely on online communication during the lockdown. She spent a lot of time calling her friends and became close with a Chinese friend in Germany during this time. Wenxi regularly cooked and worked out while chatting online with her. In addition, contact with her parents became very important and is best described as "living together, separately." Wenxi's parents were concerned about the mental health of their only daughter abroad, so they called her every day, watched TV shows with her, and played mahjong with her online.

However, students' subjective experiences with the pandemic vary, depending on how they envisioned their stay in France (temporary or long-term, etc.), their housing conditions, social networks, and the nature and intensity of their ties to the living country. For students who planned to return to China immediately after their studies, the pandemic left a gap in their time in France that they could not recover. For example, Lily, who found a job in Montpellier and began working for a petroleum services and equipment company in October 2021 after graduating from an engineering school in Paris, regrets not having taken full advantage of her stay in Paris. She thought about all the missed opportunities to meet new friends, about her canceled trips. Her experience in Paris is missing something: "It's a shame that my two years of living in Paris was spent in a pandemic."

We did not see this kind of regret among Chinese students who planned to remain in France after their completing their studies. These students project themselves into a long-time frame that is not limited to the duration of their residence permit, especially since the French government extended the

residence permits of foreign students that expired between March 16 and June 15, 2020, for a period of six months. Rather, the lockdown period gave them time to rest, reconnect, and explore new opportunities for learning and leisure. Often, these graduates formed marital ties or romantic relationships with natives in the living country. They did not feel very confined during the lockdown.

For example, Feng, who is in a relationship with a young Frenchman of Chinese descent, plans to start a family in France. During the lockdown, she considered her life in Paris full. "I live with him, and our apartment is quite big, 45 square meters, so I am quite comfortable at home. I had plants, and I was home every day. I had a few online classes, and I thought all things would come to an end, that it would end soon. I wasn't that nervous."

4 Confronting the Job Market during the Pandemic

4.1 *An Unlucky Generation?*

Many Chinese students see working in France as an integral part of their study-abroad plans, as they want to gain professional experience at French companies during or after their university studies, which is valuable in the Chinese job market. However, Covid-19 greatly disrupted their access to employment and internships.

In particular, this disruption concerns the classes of 2020 and 2021, which had their first experiences in the French job market during the public health crisis. Of all the graduates in France, those from the *grandes écoles* are the best tracked, thanks to the regular surveys of the *Conférence des Grandes Écoles* (CGE), which interviews graduates of the 193 *grandes écoles* in France six months after their graduation. According to the results of the 2021 survey on the labor market integration of graduates in the class of 2020, the health crisis had a clear impact on young graduates (Allain & Bouyer, 2021). The net employment rate less than six months after graduation is 79.1 percent compared with 88.1 percent for the class of 2019, knowing it was 76.5 % during the subprime crisis. The impacts were manifested in multiple ways. Among the respondents, regardless of their field of study, 59.9 percent stated that they had resorted to telework, 54.6 percent said that they had received fewer job offers, 19.1 percent had lowered their salary expectations, and 16.6 percent had encountered difficulty in their final internship. In this global landscape, we can posit that Chinese graduates, like other foreign graduates, experienced even greater disruption because of their status as foreigners. Being subjected to French immigration policies, as well as the ethnic and racial discrimination

they might encounter from French employers, makes them more vulnerable in seeking employment and less able to negotiate with their future employers.

Many of the graduates in the class of 2021 experienced the negative effects of the pandemic in 2020 during their studies and their search for an internship and then again in 2021 during their job search, when the effects of the crisis were still being felt.

Lily's biggest concern was not the lockdown, but the internship and job search. Because they attended a prestigious engineering school, Lily and her Chinese classmates never thought they would face so many difficulties in their search for an internship.

> During the lockdown period, I wasn't particularly stressed because it wasn't a problem that couldn't be solved, and I didn't feel as if it would last long. But I encountered a lot of difficulties in finding an internship. Because of the pandemic, many of my classmates' offers were canceled. Many people did not get internships. Finally, I found a remote internship in Montpellier—otherwise, I would have had nothing. I started looking for a job in February 2021. The job search was very stressful, and the job market hadn't recovered very much.
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

Many in the class of 2020 struggled to navigate the health crisis. They graduated in June 2020, experiencing the full impact of the pandemic. Many had to alternate between internships and periods of unemployment and did not find steady employment until 2021. The shock of Covid-19 on the labor market was first reflected in the severe reduction in job offers, as mentioned above. In the face of uncertainty, many companies froze their recruitment plans. Covid-19 also wreaked havoc on traditional job search channels and weakened institutional support normally available during a job search.

Wenxi, finished her master's degree in communication at Sciences Po in June 2020. She did not find a permanent position at a media agency until April 2021. This is quite different from pre-pandemic times, when many graduates of this prestigious institution received offers before graduation. Wenxi, referring to her own experience and that of her classmates, refers to it as "an unlucky generation."

> In my opinion, the keyword of the year of the pandemic is "shock." Everyone was overwhelmed by this sudden event, and everything was immediately thrown off balance. I was working as a trainee at a large international company, a French energy company. My boss was very nice

> to me and helped me as much as she could. She sent my CV to all the people that she knew in every department. But they all said they were unsure whether they would hire this year. So, as a new graduate, you must accept it when you face this. You can only adapt slowly.
>
> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

During 2020, job fairs were either canceled or turned into virtual meetings. These virtual fairs attracted few high-level professionals. Graduates lost an important channel for meeting recruiters. Wenxi continues:

> I would also like to add that the career fair online at Sciences Po Paris was really bad. In fact, when the annual career fair was organized in person it would give you a lot of opportunities to get in touch with different companies, and then your school's career fair normally helps you get a job. But we had a career fair that year that was very badly organized, and it was totally online. After employers set up the meeting, they forgot about it, because people were not used to doing online meetings or digital job fairs. They did not know how to use that platform. So, in the end, as the experience was really bad, we had no way to get any career support from our school.
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

Faced with this situation, Chinese graduates who want to stay in France to work adopt different strategies. For example, Qin applied for a temporary residence permit (*autorisation provisoire de séjour*, APS) to give herself a year of transition. During that year, she did another internship after graduation, while actively looking for a job:

> After my one-year apprenticeship for a large luxury group, I didn't succeed at remaining at the same company to work as an employee because recruitment was frozen: from April to September, they didn't recruit any junior-level employees. I had to do another internship after graduation. It was allowed by the school because it was a special situation, and they prolonged the internship period to the end of December 2020—normally, we can't do any internships after graduation [in July]. I already had enough internship experience, as I took a gap year between my first and second year and did two internships, but I didn't have much choice, as the work market was frozen at that time. … I went back to China to see my family at the end of 2020 and then returned to France in February to begin my job search. It took me three months to find a permanent job in June.
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

Between February and April 2021, Wenxi sent out about a hundred résumés. The job search process is always nerve-wracking. However, going through the Covid-19 ordeal collectively eased peer pressure. Because of Covid-19, respondents who found employment in France paid a heavy price. The largest consequence of the pandemic for Qin was the increase in the time it took to find a job. She feels as if she has lost a year in her professional career and has "freshman status" in the workplace. When she finally started work, she found that her colleagues were younger than she was. "I still feel as if I lost one working year; I should have begun a permanent job right after graduation." Another consequence of the pandemic is that she is less likely to negotiate her salary with the recruiter. "I felt that I had to find a job quickly because I had reached the last round [of interviews], so I was not very forceful when I negotiated the salary; I really needed the job."

Wenxi mentions two types of mismatches. The first is the mismatch between the graduate's aspirations and the professional level of the job. In the context of the public health crisis, she had to accept a trade-off between the level of the job, the role itself, and the prestige of the employer.

> Maybe with the same experience and the same level of professionalism, we could have obtained a better position in previous years, but with Covid-19 this year and so much turmoil in the job market, there is no way for us to find a better opportunity, and I think this is the biggest impact for us.
>
> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

The second is the mismatch between the desire for freedom of movement and geographic limits on choices. With travel restrictions, canceled flights, and the tightening of visa policies in many countries, Chinese graduates who dream of working in a country other than France and envision a career without borders find that their range of choices is narrowing. They can no longer build their career path in a series of countries, in a cumulative logic. National spaces are once again becoming places where in which graduates can envision their professional careers.

> Because of Covid-19, it's already very complicated for everyone to move. It's already very difficult, so we basically don't think about other countries in Europe. And then you don't have a broader choice, such as [going to] the United States, for example, or the United Kingdom. … In previous years, we might have looked at opportunities in Switzerland. But this year, due to the pandemic, we were forced to make a very hard decision—that is, in the end, whether to return to China or to remain in France. It feels

> as if we do not have another choice. For newcomers to the workplace, I think it is very cruel. That is, you must make a very difficult and tough decision at the beginning of your career. If you choose one thing, you lose another.
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, FEBRUARY 2022

Again, the pandemic did not have the same impact on the career paths of all Chinese graduates. The crisis has also had some unexpected effects: graduates with a health-related background have experienced a broadening of their career horizon in the context of the pandemic.

4.2 *After the Storm, Hit the Road*

To what extent did the pandemic alter the initial plans of our respondents? The interviews we conducted with graduates at the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 enable us to assess, in hindsight, how they decided where to establish themselves in a context of uncertainty.

Despite the disruption of the pandemic, many graduates tried to carry on with their original migration plans. This is especially true for those who have a partner. For most of our respondents, maintaining their relationship remains the top priority and dictates their choice about whether to return to China after the completion of their studies. The strength of emotional bonds and marital ties seems to be particularly resistant to the upheavals in the outside world. Feng, who is in a relationship with a young Frenchman, plans to stay in France "for at least the next ten years," even though she is worried about her professional opportunities: international exchange, the field in which she wishes to work, depends heavily on the political relationship between China and France.

> I want to find a long-term job and then engage in some international exchange programs between France and China, which is one of the reasons that I am worried about the Sino-French relationship. If this relationship changes, then my employment opportunities will certainly also be affected. It's like translation: the demand for translation is definitely something that appears only when there is an exchange. If this channel of communication is hindered …
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> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2020

The pandemic did not fundamentally change the working and living conditions in the home and host countries. The choice of our respondents to remain in France is linked to their perception of their advantages and disadvantages

in the two countries and to their priorities. In terms of professional development, our respondents emphasize: (1) better professional opportunities in France, because their French diploma and their educational institution are better recognized in France than in China; (2) a better match between their training and their professional opportunities in France; and (3) industries that are more developed in their field of specialization in France than in China. As for the quality of life and lifestyle, our respondents agree that France is ahead of China in terms of work-life balance, social protections, medical coverage, and job security. In short, it offers a better living environment for personal development.

The pandemic is temporary, but the work opportunities and quality of life conditions are permanent, according to Qin, who now works at a public relations agency in Paris:

> I always wanted to remain in France after graduation, at least to work here for a few years first, and the pandemic did not change my mind. It depends on your priorities. I chose to stay because I could find a better job in France, with better value for money and reputation. I graduated from a prestigious university in France, but in China I completed my undergraduate studies at a university that is not recognized as a 211 or 985 university,[1] and I have heard that there is academic discrimination in China.[2] The second is that I have done a lot of internships and began my career in France, so to speak. Here, there is more respect for work-life balance and a lot of vacation time, which I have gotten used to. For example, I have five weeks of paid vacation and fourteen days of furlough [*réduction du temps de travail*, RTT]. The level of comfort at work here is higher, but I have heard that at home there is no distinction between

1 In China's higher education system, universities that participate in the 211 and 985 programs are institutions that receive priority funding from the state. The 985 universities aim to become world-class universities in the twenty-first century. In 2022, China had 39 985 universities and 112 211 universities.

2 Discrimination based on the first degree earned is a phenomenon that began to appear in China in the early 2010s, in a kind of degree inflation. Some employers (e.g., universities, state-owned enterprises) select applicants based not on their skills but on their degrees, especially their bachelor's degree. It is not uncommon for job advertisements to require applicants to complete their entire education at 211 or 985 universities. In this context, Chinese graduates who have earned a master's degree from a prestigious foreign university but their bachelor's degree from a second-tier university in China might have difficulty in being considered for some competitive positions.

> life and work. I can't accept working on WeChat, I heard that in China we have to work on WeChat and have to answer requests on weekends because the boss knows that you use WeChat every day; but for me it's a personal network, and I don't want to mix it up with my work. The third is that the benefits in France are really good, such as health insurance, free medical care, unemployment benefits, etc. I have better protection here.
>
> INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN CHINESE, OCTOBER 2021

If we look at the long-term trajectories of individuals, we can better understand the effects of the pandemic on international students' integration into the labor market. For many young graduates, the pandemic caused a diversion in their career paths, rather than an irreversible turning point. This is the case, for example, for graduates who returned to China at the beginning of the pandemic but returned to France to work. These zigzagging trajectories must be understood in the timeframe of the pandemic and in the contexts of the country of origin and the host country. In the context of the public health crisis and the ensuing difficulty in job hunting, these Chinese graduates reluctantly returned to China. Then, when life returned to normal, and the economic conditions improved in France, they tried to return to France, only to find that the virus was still actively circulating. The remarks of our respondents show that they are attracted by a decent salary in France as much as they are repelled by the "compressed modernity" in the Chinese context (Chang, 2010; Roulleau-Berger, 2021):[3] this includes a high ratio between real estate prices and salary levels in big cities, an authoritarian labor regime, fierce interpersonal competition that depresses the average salary, and what the respondents call "involution" (*nei juan*). Originally used by anthropologists to describe self-perpetuating processes that keep agrarian societies from progressing, involution has become "the kind of competition that does not allow failure or exit" (Wang & Ge, 2020).

Alexander, from Zhejiang Province, arrived in France in 2016. He studied history at the University of Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne), before obtaining a master's degree in communication at Sciences Po in June 2019. As the pandemic

3 Compressed modernity, a term coined by the South Korean sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup and used by Laurence Roulleau-Berger in a study of young Chinese migrants, means "a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space" (Chang, 2010, p. 444). The historical experience of compressed modernity in East Asia is contrasted with the temporally extended path of modernization in Western Europe (Beck & Grande, 2010, p. 425).

evolved and his understanding of China and France deepened, Alexander's life trajectory took two turns. So far, he has not found a job in consulting, which is his preference in France. Faced with the explosion of Covid-19 cases in Europe and because his is single, he returned to China in March 2020, believing that it would be easier in any case to work in a Chinese-language environment. In China, he found a job as a product manager at an information technology (IT) company in Shanghai, near his home province. But over time, he began to feel increasingly dissatisfied with the social environment in China: "I don't think there's any hope, considering the high price of housing in the country, major medical care, childcare, mortgage rates. It's not the same world as France at all." He became nostalgic about his previous life in Paris: "I still miss the Orangerie Museum and the Tuileries Garden. Shanghai also has museums and parks, but I'm in a very different mood when I wander around" (interview conducted in Chinese, January 2022).

He started looking for a job in France. In July 2021, he received a job offer in consulting and returned to Paris in October 2021. Alexander lists several reasons that influenced his desire to return to France. First, having spent several years in France to complete his studies, he is older than most of his Chinese colleagues, who consider the Chinese so-called 996 work regime from 9 am to 9 pm a day, six days a week, a blessing: "At the office, I am older than my colleagues at the same level. I'm more zen and tend more to lay flat [*tang ping*],[4] with no motivation to compete. Of course, more importantly, I lack the physical strength to compete." Second, he hates the social relations game in the Chinese business world, which is very complex, and prefers to escape it. "My internship experience in France was quite friendly and even warm. So, I was just particularly naive and completely ignorant of the how things worked at home, not to mention office politics." Third, his pretax monthly salary in China of RMB 20,000 (around 2,800 euros) would not be enough for him to afford an apartment in Shanghai, a prerequisite for getting married: "So, I think, in fact, in France, whether I buy a condo or not, although it is a major topic, is not a decisive and super important one as it is in China."

Alexander's story indicates that traditional factors, such as working conditions and the quality of life, still weigh heavily for Chinese graduates in their

4 Feng (2021). *Tang ping* (lit., laying flat) is a buzzword broadly used by Chinese millennials to express a "let-it-be" attitude towards anything: working hard, buying a house, getting married and having children. This word embodies the Chinese younger generation's counter-mainstream movement against the "996 work culture." See also: https://pandaily.com/everything-you-need-to-know-about-lying-flat-%E8%BA%BA%E5%B9%B3/.

choice of destination. It also shows the importance of studying the long-term paths of Chinese students, to understand what is driven by circumstances and what is driven by individual values, aspirations, and motivations. He concludes: "I'm just an ordinary person; I saw two societies, two contexts and social climates. I would like to go to a place where I feel comfortable."

5 Conclusion

The keyword in describing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of Chinese students in France is disruption. In this chapter, we analyze the disruptive effect of Covid-19 on different aspects of the lives of Chinese students studying abroad: studies, daily life, access to employment, and migratory trajectories. First, the transition to distance learning during the first phases of the pandemic had contrasting effects on the learning processes of our respondents: negative for some and beneficial for others, depending on their discipline, level of studies, and living conditions. But Covid-19 had the clearest negative effects on the subjective dimension of the student experience: an experience in French deprived of outings and sociality is far less rich. This diminution is considered more or less irreparable, depending on their future migration plans.

Second, for new graduates, the outbreak of Covid-19 at a pivotal moment in their lives created a diversion in their subsequent career paths. This diversion is relatively long lasting, depending on their training and personal situation, reflecting the effects of existing inequality in terms of the prestige of degrees and the market value of training. Chinese graduates developed strategies for adapting to their new conditions, at the cost of many concessions.

Third, looking back over time of the pandemic enables us to better understand how the students constructed their migratory paths according to the evolution in the pandemic, by evaluating the risks and prioritizing their objectives. The health considerations that seemed overwhelming at the beginning of the pandemic gradually gave way to other more traditional concerns: for example, economic security, professional success, and personal independence.

Did the Covid-19 pandemic radically change the paradigm of Chinese student mobility (Yu, 2021)? Longer-term studies might help to answer this question. Based on the results of our survey so far, we can confirm that health conditions are only one of many motivations behind Chinese students' mobility. Even during the pandemic, the construction of young migrants' paths is still involving a social rationale.

APPENDIX TABLE 7.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Discipline/grade/ institution	Year of arrival	Year of graduation	Current situation	Marital status
Tom	23	M	Skema Business School	2019	September 1, 2020	Working in China	Single
Alice	22	F	Third-year undergraduate student at ESCE Business School	2019	2020	First-year master's student at ESCE Business School	Single
Emma	21	F	First-year master's student at the Sorbonne	2020	2022	Second-year master's student at the Sorbonne	In a relationship, in China
Fei	24	F	Professional master in sociology, the Sorbonne	2015	2021	Intern	In a relationship with a Chinese student, plans to return to China after the internship
Yan	26	F	Master in sociology, Montpellier University	2019	2021	Graduation	Has a boyfriend who is a Chinese student in Germany Stuck in France because of the cancellation of flights by the airlines
Qiang	25	M	Lyon 2 University, Sociology	2014	2020	Job hunting	No info

Alexander	27	M	IEP, Paris master's in communications	2017	June 2019	He returned to China in March 2020 and worked at a tech company, then he returned to France and received an offer from a consulting company, in October 2021, then he returned to France in July 2022.	Single (had a girlfriend when he was in China then separated)
Qiaoling	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	2020	Works at a French company in Paris	In a relationship after finding a permanent contract
Sofia	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	August 2020	Works in China	Single
Fuming	31	M	IEP, Paris	2019	2020	Works at a Chinese company in France	Has a Chinese girlfriend in France
Qin	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	2020	Works at a communications company in Paris	Single
Bing	30	M	Sorbonne 4	2016	3rd year of PhD studies	PhD studies	Has a girlfriend in China

(*Continued*)

APPENDIX TABLE 7.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees (*cont.*)

Name	Age	Gender	Discipline/grade/institution	Year of arrival	Year of graduation	Current situation	Marital status
Dan	29	F	Master's student in medical device engineering, Sorbonne	2016	Second-year master's student in 2020	In an internship in a medical equipment company	
Feng	25	F	Master's student in translation and communications, ISIT	2015	Second-year master's student	In training	In a relationship with a French person of Chinese origin, plans to stay in France
Kexin	32	F	PhD candidate in sociology, Paris 7 University	2010	2021	Preparing to defend PhD dissertation	Single
Jianhe	33	M	PhD candidate in sociology, Poitiers University	No info	No info	PhD candidate	Has a French girlfriend
Lily	26	F	Institute of technology Arts et Métiers	2016	2021	Long-term contract with a petroleum services and equipment company	Single
Wenxi	25	F	IEP, Paris, Master's student in communications	2014	2020	Long-term contract with a media agency	Single

Meng	24	F	3IS - Film and Cinema School Paris	2019	2021	Job hunting	Has a Chinese boyfriend in France since October 2021
Charles	25	M	Institute of Technology Arts et Metiers	2019	2021	Huawei China	Has a Chinese girlfriend, in China
Sarah	28	F	Fourth-year PhD student in sociology at Paris 5	No info	Graduated in 2022	Graduated in 2022 and then went back to China	Has a fiancé in China
Anna	26	F	IEP, Paris Master's student in communications	2017	2020	Canadian-Chinese, born in China, went back to Canada in September 2020 for a year and then returned to France in August 2021	Single, had a French boyfriend until September 2021

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