The Other Side of Model Minorities

by Margot Delon

While Chinese immigrants and their descendants have long been portrayed as a "model minority", Ya-Han Chuang shows how this qualifier papers over the representations that are imposed on members of this minority in France – who are now fighting back against racism.

Reviewed: Ya-Han Chuang, *Une minorité modèle ? Chinois de France et racisme anti-Asiatiques*. La Découverte, 2021, 252 p., €20.

Belatedly Studied Minorities

The publishing house La Découverte brought out a fascinating study by Ya-Han Chuang, *Une minorité modèle ? Chinois de France et racisme anti-Asiatiques* ("*A Model Minority? The French Chinese Population and Anti-Asian Racism*") in the spring of 2021. For over ten years, the author conducted an ethnographic survey in France of around a hundred Chinese migrants and their descendants. By following these surveyed people to their workplaces, their homes, and even, for some of them, to their regions of origin in China during a five-week-long field study[1], Ya-Han Chuang has collected

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[1] In it, the author observes, for example, the architecture of houses, the diversity of which she relates to migration journeys and the importance of material investments in people's home countries.

highly detailed material regarding the life stories and experiences of these heretofore all-too-neglected migrants.

Indeed, like other minorities, French Chinese people have long been obscured by their image as a model minority. Using indicators of socioeconomic success, which are also circulated through the social sciences and statistics, this representation turns certain groups that are in a demographic minority into models of success to be followed by other, more stigmatised groups. In the United States, this representation has been deconstructed in numerous works that reveal its historical construction and the processes of domination – in particular of racial domination – that this conceals. The issue has been in particular to expose the way in which the group was progressively "whitened" (Ignatiev, 1995), i.e. partially integrated into the majority population through processes of ascending social mobility and of attempting to differentiate stigmatised minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

In this respect, the French book *Une minorité modèle ?* takes the similar approach of challenging the paradox of a "minority that is viewed as a 'model' in economic terms, but which remains in many ways like a foreign body within the national community" (p. 15). This is what is revealed in particular by racist representations of a "yellow peril" (Hsu, 2015) that brutally re-emerged together with the Covid-19 epidemic in 2020[2].

How are we to understand, using the analytic tools of sociology, the particular position of this group? Following Ya-Han Chuang's argument, we must first describe the particular form of social ascent taken by this group, before trying to understand the power relations, conflictualities and mobilisations that are often occulted by the "model minority" discourse.

Specific Trajectories of Ascent

How can we explain the ascent trajectories of Chinese people in France? What forms do these take? Some indicators, in particular statistical ones, of economic stability do indeed reveal that they occupy a more privileged position than other

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[2] On this subject, one chapter of the book excellently analyses how the disease constituted a "new mechanism of racialization" (p. 200), based on new material documenting racist interactions in universities and workplaces.

minorities within social hierarchies. Such ascents are connected to migratory socialisations that are very focussed on an injunction to succeed through hard work and to more structural dynamics of racialization that give this group an advantage in certain well-defined sectors.

Just like with other groups, the economic dimension of migration is key. The issue is first to reimburse the cost of the journey. The migration narratives recorded by Ya-Han Chuang reveal a recurrence of families getting into debt to the benefit of frequently unscrupulous clandestine people smugglers, who do not stick to the agreed itineraries. Examining the "social conditions of departure" (p. 11), she also shows to what extent migration is a collective project, supported by whole families, sometimes even against the wishes of individuals, such as Wei, who reluctantly leaves behind a job as an executive to leave for France out of obedience to their parents. Often, migration also has a considerable influence on conjugal trajectories, whether the person in question is joining a partner abroad or migrating in order to provide for a family that has stayed in China. The relationship to work is thus heavily defined by economic aspirations and dispositions to devote oneself body and soul to one's work, to the detriment of one's health ("energy is our capital," as one survey respondent puts it, p. 34).

However, it would be reductive to consider these trajectories of ascent solely in terms of such forms of socialisation. To be more precise, several processes of racialization have contributed to the distribution of positions on the labour market, generating, for some migrants and descendants, an at least partial "whitening".

This perspective allows us to challenge the prejudices according to which some groups supposedly have desires for and natural skills in certain specific sectors of activity – construction for Portuguese people, for example, or sewing for Chinese people. This sectorial segregation is in fact a response to economic factors, and it is the product of social, historical and geographical dynamics[3]. By conducting her survey in the districts of Paris and Aubervilliers that specialise in ready-to-wear clothing, Ya-Han Chuang comes to several original results on this subject. She shows, for a start, that work in the ready-to-wear sector – especially when it is carried out at home – is inextricably bound up, for those migrants who have no official documents, with the need to protect themselves against police checks and the risk of expulsion. By drawing

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[3] In Chapter 2, Ya-Han Chuang describes how these "ethnic niches" function (p. 41) in relation to the manicure sector, in which positive stereotypes about Asians began to circulate in the United States before arriving in Europe, and in particular in the Parisian neighbourhood of Château d'eau, where African beauty salons now employ numerous Chinese manicurists.

a parallel with the "dormitory labour regimes" that have been studied in Italy in particular, the author explains that workspaces, which sometimes extend into flats that are divided into multiple sub-lets (thus becoming dormitories), constitute spaces of socialisation and of reinforcement of collective norms connected to migration. In this view, sectorial and residential segregation are intimately linked to the specific shaping (which we have already mentioned) of individual aspirations.

Conflictuality and Mobilisations

This sectorial concentration in certain specific locations has been crucial in the urban history of the Parisian metropolis (Guillon and Taboada Leonetti, 1986). In this respect, the author provides an interesting analysis of contemporary dynamics in the transformation of local populations and of economic activities in central Parisian districts, by describing conflicts between gentrifying residents and textile merchants, the intervention of municipal authorities (which pre-empt various premises), and the almost complete reconfiguration that has taken place in under ten years, with the near-disappearance of wholesale trade from central districts.

These power relations in the city are nevertheless seldom experienced as being racialized, just as the relationships between Chinese employees and bosses are rarely read as constituting exploitation. In contrast, in an African beauty salon in another Parisian district, "the struggle of [Chinese] employees is perceived by almost all stakeholders as an ethno-racial conflict" (p. 76). While this aspect is not explicitly tackled by the author, other surveys would doubtless allow us to better understand the modes of emergence of racialized readings or class-based readings of conflicts, in a context in which inequalities are barely sayable and in which "racism without racists" most often prevails (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

This lack of conflictuality is all the more striking given that sectorial segregation is inextricably bound up with the professional discriminations suffered by Chinese people who want to move towards positions that are traditionally occupied by members of the majority population. Using statistical data from the *Trajectoires et origines* survey (Ined/Insee, 2008-2009), the author thus objectively analyses the difficulties experienced by the second generation when searching for a stable job or even work experience, and connects these to interviews revealing the profound disenchantment of higher education graduates who believed in meritocracy and in

their chances of ascent through obtaining a degree. These failures are also painful because they must often be owned up to in the face of parents who are often sceptical about higher education, because "what's real is when you start to earn money" (p. 119). Indeed, for many families, entrepreneurship is viewed as the way of escaping both from such discriminations and from the exploitative relationships that characterise the ready-to-wear sector or domestic work. In her fifth chapter, Ya-Han Chuang shows that buying up *bar-tabac* businesses (cafés with a licence to sell tobacco products), for example, is a strategy many parents resort to in order to safeguard their children's future.

However, these children also free themselves from the norms passed down by the group by shaping, together with other groups, other systems of reference and action. The comparative analyses of several instances of mobilisation organised over the past decade by the author are very revealing in this respect. She shows how the "imperative of discretion" (Sayad, 1999) has developed according to encounters with the world of trade unions, in particular the CGT confederation of trade unions and struggles related to illegal immigrants, and with the emergence of a new anti-racist movement. Initially, it was entrepreneurs who were influential due to their material success, and who often had close ties to the Chinese embassy, who dominated the organisation of demonstrations, in particular those related to security. They put into and drew from these demonstrations resources which allowed them to accumulate "personal political capital" (p. 154). But they were also taken by surprise by other forms of protest emerging towards the end of such demonstrations, some of which were described as riots and led to confrontations between young people from the Chinese community and the police.

More critical reflection on racism in French society has also progressively been associated with these mobilisations, and the author shows well how, more largely, new antiracist dispositions emerged among second and third generation individuals who laid claim to a "Pan-Asian identity" (p. 14), acknowledging the influence of the "Black Lives Matter" movement. The last chapters in the book offer numerous avenues for further deepening the study of the social conditions and socialisations (Brun, 2019) required to achieve awareness of and denounce discriminations, aside from the framework of political socialisation constituted by the CGT's calls to arms in support of Chinese migrants, which was already described by Ya-Han Chuang in the third chapter.

Conclusion

This meticulous survey constitutes a major milestone in the study of the distribution of positions at the crossroads of multiple dynamics of stratification. The aim of the book, which is to show "how the specific situation of Asians sheds light more generally on racialization processes at work in France" (p. 227), is successfully achieved, both through its historical approach revealing the development of migratory policies, and through its field survey providing a close examination of the configurations experienced by Chinese people. If, as Ya-Han Chuang writes, "Chinese people whose migration is recent and independent of French colonial history are less subject to the injunction to acculturate than migrants who come from former African colonies" (p. 208), it would be interesting to unpick the modes and limits of their whitewashing by analysing, for example, the practices of intermarriage or ascent through higher education. Ultimately, we can well see when we close the book how the rhetoric of the model minority fully participates in the "reinforcement of the racial hierarchy" (p. 12) and that such results must urgently be made known in order to show that "in the social sphere, we are rarely protected against the 'veil of ignorance' in the face of the ethno-racial inequalities the state wishes to shield itself from" (p. 231).

Further Reading

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- GUILLON M., TABOADA LEONETTI I., 1986, *Le triangle de Choisy : un quartier chinois à Paris. Cohabitation pluri-ethnique, territorialisation communautaire et phénomènes minoritaires dans le 13e arrondissement*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 213 p.

- HSU M.Y., 2015, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*, Princeton University Press, 353 p.

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