

Disrupted Nationality: Revisiting ‘Chinese’ in the Era of “Stop Asian Hate”

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Abstract

Drawing on a two-year ethnography focused on the transnational academic trajectories of Chinese international students in London, I provide a ground-driven account of how Chinese nationality was consistently enacted, negotiated, and contested in the pandemic crisis such that it reshaped the everyday experiences of these students as oversea Chinese. As such, I shift attention to the real-life complexities, as well as the emerging inequality associated with national categories which were rendered as insignificant under the trending discourses of “Stop Asian Hate”.

Key words: Chinese nationality, Stop-Asian-Hate

In May 2021, one of my previous students from China talked to me about his latest endeavours in supporting what is now called “Stop Asian Hate” – a movement which originated in the US and that claims to counter the surge in hate crimes against Asians (at first specifically directed at American Asians and then more generally at Asians) since the global outbreak of COVID-19. Doing his undergraduate degree at a leading American university, he happened to be involved in the initial stages of the movement when students began to join the rallies, an experience that he recalled as “so revealing that it forced me to rethink who I am.” With conspicuous excitement, he described in detail how he upgraded his participation from street protests to activities that he saw as more important, which included sharing his experiences as an Asian student at campus events, writing on social media to raise anti-racist awareness, and helping to form a large social network whose aim is to fight for racial equality in the long run. As his former teacher, friend, and as someone who had been confronted with virus-related violence in London on numerous occasions, I was very much impressed by what he had achieved under the harsh conditions of the pandemic crisis. Yet, I was not convinced by who was represented in the discourses of “Stop Asian Hate”, particularly after hearing how national terms such as “Chinese” were problematised for their anti-solidaristic connotations and replaced by the term “Asian” in the activist organisations he was a member of. “You and I are Asians,” he said. “Fighting for Asians as Asians is the best way to go.”

Born in Beijing with a Chinese passport, I have always considered myself a mainland Chinese. In this sense, I am an Asian from a geographical perspective, which seems to verify the assumption that fights for Asians in general are also fights for me. But if we wind back time to January 2020 when COVID-19 first appeared in newspaper headlines, I do not remember it as an Asian affair. Instead, what I heard – sadly, I remember it vividly – were phrases such as “Chinese virus”, “Wuhan pneumonia”, “bat-eating Chinese”, “kung flu” (a portmanteau of “Kung Fu”, referring to Chinese martial arts, and “flu”), and a Twitter hashtag then as popular as #StopAsianHate became, #ChinaLiedPeopleDied. I heard these terms being employed not only by people in the so-called West, but also from Asians, some of whom were distinguishing Chinese people from Asians more diligently than ever in my anecdotal experience. Now, after

a year of tensions, conflicts, and mental issues resulting from the stigmatisation of Chinese during London's lockdown, I found myself categorised by my student and probably thousands of "Stop Asian Hate" supporters as an Asian who should pursue the collective interests of Asians. My Chinese nationality seems to have lost its relevance, omitted from mainstream discussions along with the consequences it brought about to those somehow associated with it through the pandemic.

This seemingly 'best-for-all' downplaying of national categories, as well as the union of Asian people prompted by such activist appeal, does not necessarily align with the lived experiences of overseas Chinese (that is, Chinese citizenship holders who live abroad). At least for Chinese international students in London like myself, with whom I have been doing ethnographic work for years seeking to understand their transnational academic trajectories, our nationality has never been so highlighted as at the beginning of the pandemic – so much so that it thenceforth reshaped the mundane knowledge production within and about this community. As I have shown elsewhere (Du, 2020), Chinese nationality was persistently invoked in everyday interactional practices dominated by COVID-19 matters (e.g., in common questions such as "Do you know about Wuhan?") in ways that positioned Chinese international students as obliged to respond to, if not take the blame for, the disastrous crisis faced by the entire population, either inadvertently or deliberately. As such, Chinese nationality, a buzzword deeply implicated with Donald Trump's China-targeting political propaganda, contributed to the victimisation of Chinese international students. In my fieldwork that foregrounded the everyday experiences of Chinese students in London, I got to witness how the fear of being maliciously identified as the 'source of virus' escalated among them, which reached a peak after an Asian student from the university where I conducted my research was seriously injured in a racist assault. Back then, the attacker's words – "I don't want your coronavirus in my country" – became a trending topic within the community of Chinese students in London. Everyone lamented how this rather vague utterance was interpreted via a provocative consensus on social media; that is, "your coronavirus" referred to China and the Asian student was probably targeted for being mistaken for a Chinese. Online discourses seemed to transfer the blame from the attacker to all the Chinese in the UK, based on the logic that it was Chinese who demonised all Asians in the first place by infecting the world with a "Chinese virus."

In addition to the intensified anti-Chinese sentiment in the UK, Chinese nationality was also foregrounded in the emerging "narrow nationalism" (Freedden, 1998) in China which raised controversies over who counted as "real" Chinese in the pandemic. This was shown in April 2020 when the Chinese government announced that it would arrange chartered flights to evacuate Chinese international students in the UK in response to its inefficient domestic control of COVID-19. To Chinese students, especially those who planned to go home but failed to secure a plane ticket before the UK lockdown, the announcement to some extent mitigated our concerns about the drastically growing number of cases and the normalization of racial brutality in London. However, long before the date of implementation, the way in which this arrangement had been received by the Chinese public had destroyed our ecstasy at being offered the opportunity. For example, in the comment section of the announcement on Weibo, thousands of netizens in China participated in a debate about whether it was worth saving overseas Chinese at the risk of increasing cases in China. Despite the different opinions, it was generally agreed that Chinese international students did not constitute a community that automatically deserved the government's services for Chinese people. One popular comment that continues to haunt me today perfectly illustrates this point:

我们得首先搞清楚这些留学生到底是些什么人。他们是一群脑子里只

有移民英国，留学就是为了和外国人厮混，刚出国就喷国内不好，还在一月时跑到所谓西方发达国家避难现在舔着脸要回来的人。他们根本不能算什么中国人，他们的死活我们管不着。国籍什么的在他们身上没意义。

We need to clarify who those Chinese international students really are. They are a group of people who went to the UK for migration, who did a degree to hook up with western people, who badmouthed China right after leaving, and who escaped to where they called the developed West for safety in January and now desperately wanted to return. Those people are not real Chinese and we don't need to care if they die or live anymore. Their Chinese nationality means nothing to us. (Translation by the author; this comment has been adapted for ethical concerns and to ensure anonymity)

As similar and even more hurtful messages were disseminated across major online platforms, Chinese international students were devastated by a painful irony: in London, our Chinese nationality subjugated us to racial violence for being the “virus-carrying” Chinese; in China, our Chinese nationality was interrogated in response to imagined collusions with the anti-China imperialist countries on our part. One of my research participants summed up the conundrum when I asked how they felt about the awkward position of Chinese students in the pandemic, “Shall we just tear our passports and claim refugee status so that both British here and Chinese back home can be satisfied?”

The compelling negotiations over Chinese nationality noted above marked the daily communication that I had documented in my fieldwork, which mediated what it meant to be Chinese international students and overseas Chinese in general in the COVID-19 era and the now post-COVID era. In other words, far from being an Asian affair construed in Asian terms as proposed by “Stop Asian Hate”, Chinese nationality, together with other national categories in my opinion, carries the unbearable weight of the lived experiences of and voices from individuals on the ground. These voices and experiences are marginalised by the essentialising as well as homogenising nature of the production, circulation, and domination of particular narratives legitimised in an activist vision – the symbolic violence of “normative” language use in Bourdieu’s (1986) term. In line with this observation, I argue for an ethnographic lens that shifts from examining Chinese nationality as a value-free representation of a fixed demographic group towards viewing it as a resource that channels the semiotic process of categorisation. Research should focus on how it is enacted and mobilised, where and when, by whom, for what purposes, and how this process is linked to the emergence of “new” Chinese identities anchored in the specific material and discursive conditions of the pandemic. Only through this lens can we document the real-life complexities hidden behind the “natural history” of COVID-19, which has been characterised by the flattened social hierarchy, that is, the imagined all-mankind progress from Asian hate towards “Stop Asian Hate”. Left out of the discussion are the long-standing historical, socio-political, and cultural orders that impose strict gatekeeping onto this progress.

At the end of the conversation with my student, he asked how I could contribute to “Stop Asian Hate” with my training in anthropology and sociolinguistics. I did not answer directly, but instead explained my concerns in a similar way as the present essay. Although he was disappointed with what he called a counter-productive stance of mine, he seemed to agree with me that more questions needed to be asked about the on-going Asian movements. What questions should then be asked? Perhaps start with a fundamental one: “By whom am I still

considered a Chinese?”

References

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