

BOOK REVIEW

Illusions et souffrances: les migrants chinois à Paris, by Simeng Wang, Paris, ENS, 2017, 220 pp., €22.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-2-7288-0574-7.

"The streets of Belleville are emptying from fear of the Coronavirus" read the headline in *Le Monde* in early February 2020, describing the state of mind in the Parisian Chinatown, weeks before the residents of the City of Light realized that calamity was upon them. But if Belleville and its concentration of Chinese restaurants, supermarkets, import/export houses, and prostitutes, represent a central node in the link between China and its diaspora worldwide, it comprises only a slice of the dynamic, constantly evolving Chinese population that has converged on Paris and its surroundings in recent years. Beneath the label lies an increasingly heterogeneous population. The longest-established streams stem mainly from the province of Wenzhou, near Shanghai, as opposed to Guangdong in south China, the historical source of Chinese migration to the Americas. Though migration from the Wenzhou region continues, the Chinese of Paris now fall out along a myriad of axes – geographic and social class origins in China, legal status, and increasingly, generation. That diversity and its consequences are the subject of this insightful book by Simeng Wang, a China-born, France-trained sociologist. Focusing on the encounter between a range of Chinese-origin Parisians and the mental health system and drawing on interviews with parents, children, and mental health professionals as well as accompanied visits to mental health centers and providers, Wang acutely demonstrates how these different sources of heterogeneity generate both varied forms of suffering and multiple strategies aimed at suffering's alleviation.

Though not quite stated in this way, the book proceeds from the outside in. In a series of successive chapters, Wang starts with the adult immigrants who arrived as political refugees in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and then continues on, first to those who came slightly later as international students, next to their contemporaries who arrived as undocumented workers, then to members of the 1.5 generation who stayed on in China after their parents left for France only later to rejoin them, and last to the emerging 2nd generation, largely emanating from the longstanding Wenzhou community. While every unhappy migrant is unhappy in his or her own way, Wang shows that the causes are not random, but rather structured. It is precisely in the search for the underlying sources of unhappiness as well as their expression via engagements with the mental health system and mental health practitioners that Wang's book generates intellectual rewards, not just for those interested in this particular population, but for a broader audience of migration scholars.

Thus, as migration researchers have repeatedly demonstrated, population movements across borders generate connections linking places of origin and destination. While those ties are a ubiquitous feature of the migratory phenomenon, they are neither maintained nor experienced in identical ways. Thus, for the

political refugees, China is at once far and near: far, in that the rupture caused by flight from violence is rarely healed by return (thus demonstrating again that the capacity to “live lives across borders” is not a decision for the migrants to make on their own); near, in that the tension between the collectivistic norms of their youth and the individualism of the west generates the mental anguish that in turn leads to psychotherapy as a form of release and repair. By contrast, the successor generation of international students, having arrived from a prosperous, capitalist China comes equipped with expectations that are more closely matched to those prevailing in France. Yet, they suffer from problems in fit, exacerbated by the persistence and intensity of ties connecting back home. Integrating into the Parisian life style while continuing to adapt to parental ways of thinking leave these highly skilled migrants “between the two, it’s tiring and sometime very painful (83),” as one of Wang’s respondents explains. But even if the quest of reconciling commitments connecting to “there” and those extending to “here” proved taxing, on balance “here” prevailed over “there,”

If the demonstration that migration makes the migrants different from the stay-at-homes can be seen as an indicator of integration or assimilation, Wang’s book shows that those outcomes prove far more difficult to attain for Chinese migrants in a vulnerable legal status, whose suffering lies in French migration control strategies and migrants’ efforts to circumvent them. In Paris, as elsewhere in the Chinese diaspora, intensified efforts at migration control have generated a growing undocumented population. Often arriving with the help of smugglers, to whom the migrants remain indebted, they then find themselves locked into clandestine employment, frequently under the exploitative thumb of Wenzhou compatriots. However, a peculiarity of French immigration law – permitting for the regularization of persons who suffer from an illness of “exceptional gravity” and for whom the appropriate treatment can’t be found in the country of origin (94) – provides a possible escape hatch, but only for those whom the misery of life in the underground economy produces verifiable suffering. Therein lies the pathos of the migrant encounter with the mental health system, as the professionals are on guard, especially against migrant parents who may be using their children’s problems as a strategy for gaining legal status. Yet another option arises in the case of undocumented child migrants who have been deliberately brought to Paris well after their parents had settled down, as this sequence of moves in turn can put families on the route to regularization on the grounds of family reunification. Yet if regularization reduces suffering, the migratory sequence increases it, as the child migrants are at once angry for having been left behind and subsequently resentful for the services that they render to their parents, thanks to the children’s much more rapid adaptation to the French reality. As with the selective migrants, balancing the sense of obligation to parents with the aspirations created by the new reality is a source of anguish, which the child migrants manage by mobilizing ties to the world beyond the Chinese ethnic enclave.

While Wang’s book thus contains lessons for migration scholars writ large, it will prove no less valuable to researchers whose interests are more closely aligned with the particular case in question. For students of immigration to

France, whose attention has largely been focused on post-colonial migration, Wang's is an important contribution to the still small literature on immigrants stemming from very different contexts. Students of the Chinese diaspora will benefit from the light it sheds on the coexistence of different migration streams from China and the correspondingly varied circumstances of migration. And as the book's transversal approach shows how to study the heterogeneity lying beneath a common ethnic category, it provides a primer for budding migration scholars, which is why a broader audience would gain from an English translation.

Roger Waldinger

Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles

 waldinge@soc.ucla.edu

© 2020 Roger Waldinger

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1777318>

