Why Can't Chinese Citizens Go Home? Spoiled Citizenship and Stigmatized Returns in Pandemic Times

Juan Zhang

Introduction

In March 2020, a topic on China's largest social media platform Weibo titled '#Returning international student responding to public criticism during quarantine' went viral, capturing the attention of millions. Within days, it amassed 260 million views and tens of thousands of comments. What triggered this maelstrom of online reaction was a vlog created by a Chinese student named Yang, who was returning to China from Italy, at that time the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe. This vlog chronicled Yang's arduous 30-hour journey, marked by anxiety and multiple stop-overs due to the sudden cancellation of direct flights. It concluded with his eventual safe arrival in the city of Shanghai – just one example of the efforts of international students to return home in the face of challenges during the early stages of the global health emergency.

What could have been an ordinary international journey home took a remarkable twist, fuelled by the intense paranoia that existed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yang's story immediately drew online criticism, not just towards him as an individual but also towards 'overseas Chinese' as a whole, who were perceived collectively as a potential threat. Tens of thousands were making efforts to return from various disease hotspots in Europe and the US, where COVID-19 death tolls were steadily rising. Many of these Chinese returnees, including students and working professionals, were reported to be fleeing the Global North in large numbers during the

early stages of the outbreaks (Fifield, 2020; Weale, 2020). However, their 'shock mobilities' – sudden movements in response to acute anxiety and disruptions (Xiang et al, 2023) – ignited new social tensions as returnees found themselves scapegoated as the people responsible for reintroducing COVID-19 back into China. Although China was the country where the SARS-CoV-2 virus was initially detected as the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019, by March 2020, when the outbreak began spreading to the rest of the world, the first wave of infections in China had been brought under control. The Chinese government had declared a victory in containing and effectively 'eliminating' COVID-19 within the country's borders. Consequently, from March 2020, Chinese citizens were led to believe that subsequent COVID-19 cases and domestic outbreaks were primarily a result of the virus being 'imported'; it was believed to have re-entered China through imported goods and individuals travelling into the country. Consequently, negative sentiments quickly emerged in Chinese public discourse, with condemnations directed at the mobility and return of overseas Chinese (Yuan, 2020). Migrant returnees were accused of being 'the least involved in contributing to the motherland', and the phrase 'the most capable of spreading the virus for thousands of miles' (*jianshe zuguo ni buzai, qianli songdu ni zuixing*) gained immediate traction and popularity in China (Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1: Accounts of the phenomenon of *qianli songdu* proliferated across Chinese social media
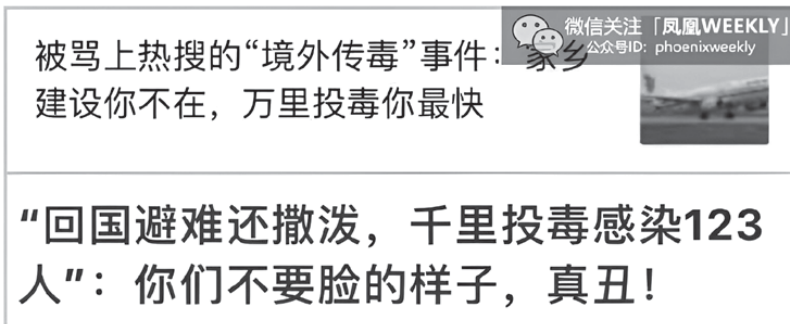
Note: The image is a screenshot taken from Phoenix Weekly's WeChat public account featuring headlines that read (top) 'The case of "imported viral infection" gained prominence following public criticism: while you were absent in contributing to the homeland's progress, you were the quickest to spread poison from thousands of miles away' (被骂上热搜的 "境外传毒"事件: 家乡建设你不在，万里投毒你最快） and (bottom) '"Recklessly seeking refuge in China and infecting 123 people by spreading the virus from a distance." Your shamelessness is truly ugly!' ("回国避难还撒泼，千里投毒感染123人": 你们不要脸的样子，真丑!).

Source: www.ifengweekly.com/detil.php?id=9279

The term *qianli songdu*, meaning 'spreading the virus for a thousand miles', vividly encapsulated the stigmatization of mobility in the midst of an uncontrolled pandemic. It marked a period when both internal and international movements were closely regulated and policed in line with the logic of a 'crisis regime of mobility' (Salazar, 2021), which classified movements along 'essential' and 'non-essential' axes. International travel for health precautions and disease avoidance, under such circumstances, was not only deemed non-essential but also viewed with suspicion and considered potentially harmful. Public criticism directed at travelling individuals, who allegedly 'spread the virus for a thousand miles', therefore fortified new biopolitical borders that were justified on the grounds of public health and civic responsibility. The word *du*, in its most literal translation, did not directly refer to the virus itself but rather to a 'poison' or 'toxin' that could have fatal consequences if it came into contact with a healthy body and caused infection. Individuals carrying such toxicity were perceived as potential carriers of danger and harm, with returning migrants increasingly blamed for allegedly 'poisoning China' and sabotaging the country's previously successful pandemic response. Critics voiced their grievances that returning migrants were selfishly benefiting from China's defence efforts without actively contributing and that they were also burdening China's public health system, which relied on the tireless efforts of tens of thousands of volunteers who dedicated months to safeguarding health borders and defending Chinese lives. As a result, returning Chinese faced heightened scrutiny during their journeys home, as they were viewed as jeopardizing the nation's hard-won progress in the fight against the virus.

The association of 'toxicity' with international mobility shed light on the 'spoiled citizenship' of Chinese nationals abroad. Compromised by imaginations of infection, they were denied the right to return, and due to fears about contagion, their intentions were deemed irresponsible. Overseas Chinese thus found themselves subjected to a double stigmatization resulting from both COVID-related xenophobia and the discriminatory Othering of mobile bodies. While abroad, they faced intense racism and attendant anxiety fuelled by discourses surrounding the 'China virus'. Yet, on contemplating their return, they were labelled as 'toxic suspects' (*daidu xianfan*), feared as potentially carrying the virus back to their families and communities.

Much has been written on migrants as carriers and transmitters of infectious diseases, ranging from tuberculosis to HIV (for example, Grove and Zwi, 2006), Ebola (Thomas, 2019) and the more recent COVID-19 (O'Brien et al, 2021). The notion of the migrant body as 'diseased' has long been a familiar trope, evoking a particular image of the migrant as either a threatening figure coming from the outside (Su, 2020) or an individual with heightened vulnerability in need of separation from native citizens (White, 2020). However, when the 'migrant' in question is a returning

citizen, someone ostensibly 'one of us', the grounds for fear become less stable and the dynamics of differentiation reveal great ambiguity. One's citizenship status, in the context of pandemic-era China, did not guarantee automatic inclusion and trust, unless individuals could demonstrate belonging through acts of solidarity, demonstrating deservingness. The disease stigma attached to 'foreigners' and 'migrants' also tarnished the identity of returning citizens, whose claims to full recognition and formal rights were often heavily discounted. Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1963) notion of stigma and 'spoiled identity', it is important to consider how 'spoiled citizenship' could rewrite social relations when COVID-19 became a powerful attribute according to which bodies were stigmatized and discredited, social surveillance was reinforced and a particular moral regime was upheld. Spoiled citizenship brings to the fore how one's deservingness – signifying moral worth – can be separated from entitlement as legal and formal rights (see Willen, 2012). It also underscores how citizenship as both a status and a web of relationships involves not only physical and metaphorical boundaries but also the various sites and practices that imbue it with meaning (Staeheli, 2011).

This chapter aims to offer a preliminary analysis of the imagined and embodied 'toxicity' of international mobility and how it became an attribute of spoiled citizenship when it was used to validate a discourse of blame directed at travelling and returning citizens. The toxicity of mobility justified a new moral regime of containment that actively stigmatized moving bodies and things while creating a distinct category of citizenship tainted by an Other identity. Within this moral regime of containment, Chinese citizens residing abroad found themselves effectively barred from exercising their right to return home. Negative representations in both popular and official media portrayed them as selfish and irresponsible individuals, casting them as 'underserving citizens' bringing risk home. In this light, returning home became both undesirable and unethical. Simultaneously, a counter-narrative emerged among travelling migrants asserting their 'right to go home'. Many defended their mobility decisions by invoking the same ethical framework of responsibility, contending that their adherence to regulations and vigilance against infection risks had earned them the right to return. They also distanced themselves from other 'irresponsible' returnees, who voiced complaints and resisted regulations (for example, demanding the right to outdoor activities during quarantine), and in doing so reinforced a moral discourse on immobility that imposed restrictions on their movements.

Moralizing pandemic immobility

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the curtailment of cross-border movement due to successive travel restrictions, national lockdowns and border closures has been well documented. Fears of contagion and

the imperative to contain and control viral transmission have shaped a new 'mobility regime', an intersecting system of mobility control through cultural norms and policies, previously theorized by scholars such as Shamir (2005) as well as Schiller and Salazar (2013). This Covid-19 mobility regime was characterized by a pervasive sense of 'stuckedness' (Hage, 2009), particularly evident during the first two years of the pandemic worldwide. In certain regions, stringent border controls have led to prolonged immobility.

Recent research has shed light on how border closures and travel restrictions effectively trapped migrants in place, exacerbating their vulnerabilities with the loss of employment, lack of care, disease stigma and destitution (Ullah et al, 2021). Temporary migrant workers and undocumented migrants suddenly found themselves jobless and homeless, and many were compelled to undertake 'extreme mobility', with tens of thousands embarking on arduous journeys home on foot (Nayar, 2020). Scholars have observed how this new mobility regime under COVID-19 restricted 'the physical mobility of some, while granting highly conditional mobility to others, resulting in situations of enforced and permanent temporariness and ontological insecurity' (Brandhorst et al, 2020, p 263). Immobilities triggered by COVID-19 have prompted scholars to question the problematic restrictions on freedom of movement (Mezzadra and Stierl, 2020) and the pathological control of transnational flows (Lin and Yeoh, 2021).

Prior to examining 'pandemic immobilities' (Adey et al, 2021), migration scholars had already been offering a renewed critique of the long-held mobility bias, considering non-movement, interruptions, stops and stasis as crucial processes in need of theoretical engagement (Schewel, 2019). Scholars such as Bélanger and Silvey proposed an 'immobilities turn' to shift focus on the 'constraints, regulations, and limits simultaneously placed on migration, everyday mobility, and border crossings at multiple scales' (2019, pp 3429, 3425). While, previously, studies on migrant immobilities portrayed the roles played by nation states with their pervasive regulatory and disciplinary structures underpinning who could move and who ought to stay (for example, Bigo, 2002; Johnson, 2015), migrant subjective experiences and their agency in rationalizing and regulating (non)-movements are now receiving more attention in this immobilities turn (Tan et al, 2022; Zhang and Wang, 2023).

The expanding body of literature on pandemic-induced (im)mobilities offers a crucial analytical framework for delving into the lived experiences, migrant aspirations and evolving imaginaries of borders and movements. Nevertheless, two aspects warrant further discussion. First, the pandemic-specific mobility regime necessitates contextualization within an evolving moral framework, where various movements, decisions, and bodies are ascribed differing values and claims to legitimacy. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that the 'elementary freedom to move' can be curtailed in the

name of 'the greater good', with mobility itself subjected to scrutiny based on made-up criteria of essentiality (Mezzadra and Stierl, 2020). Forced immobility, particularly during the pandemic, has become normalized and moralized through shifting public discourses surrounding responsibility, deservingness and national (health) security. Mobility, especially when perceived as non-essential, is now closely intertwined with notions of contagion and risk (and increasingly with discourses around climate change), making it highly susceptible to containment and delegitimization.

Second, the emerging (im)mobility regime also introduces a distinct categorization process where assumed boundaries between self and Other are redrawn. The migrant, as demonstrated in existing studies (see, for example, Nail, 2015), constitutes the 'perfect Other', in most cases as an ambivalent figure delineating national borders that separate domestic citizens from 'outsiders'. Returning nationals, who have resided outside of the country, embody a unique 'migrant' identity that further complicates the nationalized imagination of 'we-ness'. Do returning citizens still constitute a part of the national 'we'? Or are they categorized differently, mirroring shifting perceptions of belonging, especially when the broader society has grappled with health-related threats?

Focusing on Chinese nationals residing overseas who sought to return home during the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter illustrates how their homecoming was stigmatized within the moral regime of pandemic immobility. They were disproportionately represented by the Chinese public discourse as the culprit for domestic transmission. This stigmatization served a broader political agenda aimed at regulating mobility within China, where the curtailment of citizens' everyday movement could occur with minimal resistance against COVID-19 control. Furthermore, this chapter explores how returning Chinese nationals cultivated an image of themselves as responsible and patriotic returnees, countering the prevailing stigma and discrimination. In doing so, they inadvertently reinforced the same moral underpinning of immobility that hinged on conditions of deservingness.

Difficult returns during COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out, it prompted a global wave of panic and the declaration of a worldwide 'war' against the coronavirus (New York Times, 2020). This was followed by border closures and travel restrictions, while the media's proliferation of 'outbreak narratives' (Wald, 2008) fuelled xenophobia, fear and even acts of violence (Elias et al, 2021). Race-based hate crimes driven by coronavirus-related fears began to surge, particularly targeting individuals with an Asian appearance. Headlines recounting incidents of verbal harassment and physical assault intensified the prevailing sense of fear, particularly among Chinese residents in Europe

and North America, who were already anxious due to rising infection rates. In France, for instance, the French media used phrases like 'Chinese virus' and 'yellow alert' when referring to the pandemic, while words such as 'pangolin' and 'bat' were frequently mentioned to implicate China as the outbreak origin (Wang et al, 2020). In the UK, Chinese nationals feared not only the virus itself but also potential racist attacks triggered by widespread 'maskaphobia'. One student in Manchester voiced their concerns, stating: 'We are not only afraid of coronavirus, but the violence brought by racism is also much more scary now. I have got the feeling I am an outsider in the UK. And now I finally find we are not welcomed by British people. Diversity sounds like a joke' (Weale, 2020).

It was also during this time of acute panic and uncertainty, when tens of thousands of Chinese citizens sought to leave Europe and return to China for safety, that returning home was no longer a straightforward option. Effective from 29 March 2020, the Civil Aviation Administration of China implemented the 'Five One' (*wu ge yi*) policy, capping international flights at an extremely low level. This policy put in place stringent limitations, allowing only one flight per week on one specific route to one country. In the first week of the Five One policy, a mere 108 flights were authorized to land in China, each flight operating at only 75 per cent capacity, which amounted to just 1.2 per cent of the usual flight volume compared to pre-pandemic levels (Caijing, 2020).

The Five One policy was enforced at a juncture when China had already successfully contained widespread domestic transmission and declared triumph in its 'people's war against COVID'. By March 2020, signs of economic recovery were emerging in China, while the rest of the world was just beginning to grapple with the chaos induced by COVID-19. This proclaimed victory gave rise to a strong nationalist narrative asserting that China was managing the pandemic better than any other country in the world (de Kloet et al, 2020). This narrative bolstered the defensive stance around China's hard-earned 'immunity' against viral infection. Consequently, China's pandemic response shifted towards preventing 'foreign imports' at its border and imposing mandatory quarantine measures at designated national entry points.

Despite the heightened travel restrictions, for tens of thousands of Chinese seeking safety with their families, the desire to return home proved to be strong. As a consequence, air travel costs skyrocketed and flight availability plummeted. Chinese in the UK and across Europe found their prebooked flights cancelled at the last minute. Many were forced to purchase multiple tickets in anticipation of such cancellations, and a fortunate few resorted to chartering private jets for their journey home (Zhang and Lampert, 2020). During the initial wave of the pandemic, an estimated 1.4 million Chinese remained overseas; for many of them, staying put was often not a matter of choice (Xia, 2022).

From the early months of 2020 through to December 2022, a substantial number of Chinese nationals residing abroad found themselves unable to return to China. The expenses associated with travel remained exorbitant and flight availability was capped to a minimum. In order to maintain a 'COVID-free bubble' within China, stringent border control measures were tightened further with a rigorous COVID-19 testing protocol and an extended compulsory quarantine period for international arrivals, which could extend to 56 days. These measures persisted throughout 2021 and 2022, with only minor adjustments made by the Chinese authorities, such as modifications to testing requirements or the duration of mandatory quarantine. It was not until the close of 2022 that these restrictions were lifted as a result of the Chinese state's rash decision to abandon its 'zero-COVID' policy (Ling and Zhang, 2023).

The 'foreignness' of COVID-19

Although COVID-19 first broke out in the Chinese city of Wuhan, over the course of the next two years Chinese authorities vehemently rejected accusations regarding the virus' origin. Instead, they asserted that the US was to blame for introducing the virus to China (Nie, 2020). An elaborate conspiracy theory targeted at the US in particular and the West in general (effectively, politicizing the pandemic) quickly gained traction among Chinese citizens, who came to believe that the coronavirus was a 'foreign' entity and that China had been victimized by West-engineered 'biological warfare' but had dealt with the threat responsibly and successfully. Misinformation and fearmongering spread widely within China, fuelling a new wave of xenophobia alongside a growing sense of nationalism (Elias et al, 2021). African migrants residing in Guangzhou, for example, were targeted for COVID-19 testing and contact tracing, and many were forcibly evicted from their accommodation for no good reason other than people's fear of infection (see, for example, Castillo and Amoah, 2020; Ma, 2020). Anti-Black discrimination was acutely symptomatic of the deep-seated racism in China, compounded by a disease paranoia reminiscent of earlier epidemics related to HIV/AIDS and Ebola (Ouassini et al, 2022).

The xenophobic reactions during COVID-19 mirrored China's approach to previous infectious outbreaks, notably the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the H1N1 influenza outbreak in 2009. Katherine Mason (2015) observes the racialization of viruses and infections, where highly infectious viruses were depicted as 'White' and 'foreign', but not Chinese. During the H1N1 outbreak, for example, Chinese public health experts repeatedly emphasized to Mason that H1N1 was 'not a Chinese virus' and that its 'Euro-American genes' were uniquely predisposed to infect Euro-American populations.

These experts 'cast H1N1 as a Euro-American disease and diverted any blame for the spread of foreign viruses inside China' (Mason, 2015, p 501).

COVID-19, in a similar vein, has been recast as a foreign virus imported from the 'outside' shortly after the initial outbreak in Wuhan was contained. As Chinese authorities began to insinuate the pandemic's potential origins in the US, they effectively 'raced' the virus to be 'White' (or 'Black') and foreign so as to refute the blame and avoid it being characterized as a 'Chinese virus'. This manufactured 'foreignness' of COVID-19 also served the purpose of creating distance between China and the prolonged threat of (re)infection. As long as public health authorities could prevent the virus from re-entering China's borders, this narrative might explicitly absolve China from responsibility.

Stigmatized returnees and spoiled identity

Once COVID-19 was framed as a foreign threat, especially as an 'American virus' originating from outside China, individuals attempting to enter the country were viewed with suspicion as potential virus carriers. Chinese nationals, particularly those residing in the US or Europe, found themselves in a new identity category that fell into an ambiguous space between being Chinese and wholly foreign. Returning Chinese bodies, consequently, became a source of particular concern due to this ambiguity. Once these returnees crossed Chinese borders, they were not as easily identifiable and traceable as Black or White foreigners. This raised the risk that the virus could be reintroduced by these travelling bodies, potentially breaching the racialized boundaries that had been established as a frontline defence against the pandemic.

Not only was the coronavirus 'raced' to create essential separation from being called Chinese, but returnees were also 'raced' as a separate from ordinary citizens living inside China. Their increased exposure to the West and the virus itself spoiled their identity as fully Chinese citizens, and their bodies were associated with unknown risks of deception and contagion. As Mason states, the 'racialisation of foreign, immigrant, or ethnic minority populations' has long been utilized as 'a means to separate out the infectious from the non-infectious' (2015, p 502). Mobile individuals, in particular, have often been the 'target of racialisation discourses aimed at keeping them from crossing boundaries guarded by those in power' (Mason, 2015, p 502). The racialization of Chinese nationals in the context of COVID-19 occurred in two interconnected realms, both closely associated with the virus. Outside China, their presence served as a reminder of the devastating 'Chinese virus' that wrecked lives; within China, they symbolized an 'imported infection' that posted a threat to public health in the country.

This dual process of racializing Chinese nationals living overseas introduced new dimensions to their identities and transnational movements. It also gave

rise to a distinct ambiguity that resisted any kind of stable categorization. The mobility of bodies and the potential for contagion complicated the meanings of being Chinese as they crossed borders, particularly during a period when a deadly virus – a strong signifier of disease and impurity and a familiar trope in bioterrorism and biothrillers (Mayer, 2007) – registered unprecedented perceptions of threat. The virus, described as 'a trope of interrelation, mix-up, complication, subtlety and subversion' (Mayer, 2007, p 1), implicated invisible harm brought back by the transnational return journeys of Chinese nationals. These journeys, consequently, were imagined as pathways for the 'foreign' virus to infiltrate and breach the containment measures that had protected China.

On 19 March 2020, news broke regarding a man named Guo Weipeng from Zhengzhou city, Henan Province, who travelled to Milan to watch an Italian Serie A football match on 1 March 2020, right in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak. A few days later, on his return to China, Guo was found to be infected with the virus (Sina News, 2020). In the two days following his return, Guo continued his regular activities, including going to work, grocery shopping and visiting a pharmacy, until he started showing symptoms. Guo became the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Henan Province, which has a population of 96 million. To the alarm of the local Centre for Disease Control in Zhengzhou City, nearly 40,000 individuals could have potentially come into contact with him within three days of his return, as he had been to various public places. Furthermore, some of his family members and several colleagues had already tested positive for the virus. This incident sparked immediate public panic in China, and Guo was given the pejorative nickname 'virus king' (*duwang*). Chinese authorities not only disclosed Guo's detailed travel itinerary through multiple media platforms but also shared his personal information, including his address and current employment status. By the time the news spread, Guo had already been apprehended by the police and charged with 'endangering public safety by dangerous means', a crime carrying severe penalties, including the possibility of life imprisonment.

The official announcement containing Guo's personal information and travel itinerary circulated widely on Chinese social media, eliciting public outrage directed toward Guo himself as well as other returning Chinese citizens, who were regarded as endangering tens of thousands of lives. The itemized itinerary provided a traceable record that portrayed Guo's trip to Italy as the source of mass infection. Guo's personhood disappeared in this public scandal when his identity became overwhelmingly entangled with the virus. Accused of being the 'virus king', Guo's spoiled identity cast him as a stigmatized figure, an Other within his own country and a national being 'out of place'. Guo, along with many others in similar situations, became the coronavirus personified, appearing to enter China from beyond its borders and disrupt and cause harm.

Guo's incident occurred simultaneously with several similar cases that went viral on social media platforms. These incidents all followed a similar pattern: Chinese returnees concealing their travel histories and subsequently testing positive after having possibly transmitted the virus and spread infection during their journeys back home. In a matter of days, online forums and social spaces were filled with criticism and growing resentment towards these Chinese returnees (Xia, 2022). Students in particular were referred to as 'giant babies' (*juying*) or 'spoiled brats' who had the economic means 'to flee China's brutal educational competition and then return home to reduce their coronavirus risk' (Jing, 2021, p 2). A few Chinese students studying in the US told the BBC that they were 'getting the short end of the stick from both sides' and felt like they were 'being kicked like a ball between the two countries'. They lamented how 'America wants to kick us out, while China doesn't allow us to return' (Feng, 2020).

On 23 May 2020, a Chinese student posted a vlog titled 'Foreign students' heart-breaking return in 2020, on the Five One Policy' on the popular video-sharing platform Bilibili (the equivalent of YouTube in the Chinese social media space). The video quickly garnered 10,000 views within days.[1] The vlogger, known as 'Elephant Susan', was a Chinese student in the US who shared her experiences of being stranded abroad due to multiple cancelled flights resulting from the Five One travel restrictions. She expressed feelings of helplessness and despair, describing the Five One policy as a 'fatal blow' (*zhiming de daji*) to overseas Chinese who needed to return home. Comments under this video showed a mix of strong sympathy and harsh criticism. One comment, for instance, read 'Stay out of China! Do you want to oppress (*pohai*) people back home? Are you returning to "poison" (*toudu*) us? We are already in a miserable situation, just give us an opportunity to live' (comment by 'pulushi chifei', posted 25 May 2020, Bilibili).

In addition to being stigmatized as 'virus carriers' (or even as the 'virus' itself), returning Chinese nationals were also labelled as 'pandemic refugees', adding another layer of separation intended to diminish any sense of entitlement or rights that Chinese returnees might assert. Chenchen Zhang (2020) observes a growing hostility in recent years aimed at immigrants, Muslims, feminists and asylum seekers within Chinese society, particularly in its online spaces. This trend mirrored the rise of Right-wing populism in Europe and North America. Chinese netizens picked up the vocabulary of the populist Right during the 2015 European refugee crisis and the 2016 US presidential election, becoming familiar with the overwhelmingly anti-refugee and anti-liberal rhetoric. Within the Chinese popular media landscape, immigrants and refugees, together with Muslims and Black individuals, were consistently portrayed as 'lazy, crime-prone and self-entitled', reinforcing an image of the ethno-racial Other as a stark contrast to the perceived Chinese self (that is, hard-working and high achieving; Zhang,

2020, p 101). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this xenophobia and unapologetic racism, so much so that even Chinese nationals returning from abroad could not escape these extreme forms of Othering or avoid being stigmatized or verbally assaulted.

Online discussions claimed 'China is not a refugee camp' (Phoenix Weekly, 2020) and urged returning nationals to reconsider their actions so as not to strain China's public health system. On Zhihu, China's largest question-and-answer forum, akin to Quora, the following question was raised: 'What are your views on the verbal abuse by Chinese netizens directed at international students who returned home during the pandemic?'[2] This question attracted over 11 million views and received more than 4,500 responses. A notable reply, posted by 'Huli Chenxi' – a prominent influencer with nearly 400,000 followers on Zhihu – likened Chinese returnees to 'pandemic refugees':

> Our country certainly will never abandon any compatriot who holds Chinese citizenship or uses a Chinese passport. We cannot turn away those who wish to return driven by a sense of compatriot sentiments. However, they need to get a better grip of who they are and be realistic with where they stand. They need to realise that escaping the plague outside China is still an act of fleeing, and people need to act accordingly and approach it with humility. Do not expect that after studying abroad for a few years, or having obtained a Green Card and permanent residency, they will be treated as VIPs on their return, entitled to special treatment and privileges. (Huli Chenxi, 18 March 2020)[3]

The 'refugee' status associated with returning Chinese nationals, while temporary, consolidated a sense of Otherness. In Hélène Joffe's examination on risk and the Other, she explains how the Other was often defined in terms of 'difference and inferiority in relation to normative values in an ongoing sense' and notes that the 'representations that arise at times of crisis intensify this distinction' (Joffe, 1999, p 23). Mary Douglas (1966) previously demonstrated how a clear divide between the righteous 'us' and the transgressive 'them' could effectively create in-group solidarity and uphold the system of moral values that 'we' have established for ourselves. Chinese returnees, labelled as 'COVID refugees', symbolized both the chaos and failures symptomatic of the problems with the 'outside' world and China's safety and strength on the 'inside'. This stark contrast not only legitimized the 'contagion discourse' by reinforcing fortified borders and even stricter control over mobility, but also affirmed a sense of Chinese exceptionalism and biopolitical nationalism in the global war against COVID-19 (de Kloet et al, 2020).

Becoming deserving Chinese again

To return or not to return became a profound moral dilemma that overseas Chinese students grappled with in the weeks and months of the subsequent waves of the pandemic. Many ultimately chose to 'stay put', viewing this not just as an act of self-sacrifice to protect others but also as a means to regain recognition as legitimate, deserving Chinese citizens after the immediate crisis subsided. Staying in place was rationalized as a duty and obligation, as voluntary immobility was seen as the opposite of 'spreading the virus' or 'sending harm from afar'. By keeping the threat of infection at a distance from Chinese borders, would-be returnees believed they were serving their nation by alleviating the strain on infection control efforts and not 'bringing chaos to the nation' (*gei guojia tianluan*), thus supporting the work of Chinese public health workers and authorities. Many overseas students were personally swayed by these arguments, including 'Elephant Susan', who decided not to pursue their 'selfish' desires to return in order to safeguard the 'COVID-free bubble' maintained by China's fortified biopolitical borders. Convinced that China was 'the safest place in the world' (RFI, 2020), students credited the colossal efforts of the Chinese state in implementing draconian control measures even if it meant they themselves were prevented from returning home.

For those who made the decision to return, in an effort to counter the stigmatizing discourse representing returnees as irresponsible, transgressive and selfish, Chinese nationals developed their own framework of responsibility. Many diligently practised self-protection as they travelled across numerous airports and train stations, check-points and quarantine facilities, meticulously adhering to every safety guideline on final arrival and cooperating fully with authorities. Being recognized as a 'responsible returnee' on the way home was therefore a reward for good behaviour and a recognition of one's deservingness. B.L. (2023) details the tedious yet necessary 'rituals' that Chinese students undertook in preparation for their return. According to her account, in 2022 some students took rapid antigen tests daily for two months leading up to their departure in order to maintain a COVID-free status. Others engaged in extended pre-departure self-isolation, even when it was not required by either UK or Chinese authorities. To ensure they could travel COVID-free, some Chinese students in the UK, at a time when almost all COVID-19-related restrictions were lifted in the city where they resided, voluntarily limited their social activities and refrained from going out unless absolutely necessary. Their voluntary quarantine might have seemed excessive in the UK context when self-isolation was not even required for those testing positive for COVID-19.

These additional preventative measures bore a resemblance to the expected practices in China under the prolonged 'zero-COVID' (*qingling*) regime.

While the rest of the world had, to some extent, transitioned back to more 'normal' lives, in China, people continued to live under the coercive biopolitical apparatus institutionalized by the state in pursuit of zero infection targets three years into the pandemic (Yerushalmy, 2022). Within China's borders, it was nearly inconceivable to go anywhere without a negative COVID-19 test. Contracting the virus could trigger instant stigmatization, with infected individuals often blamed for being careless or irresponsible (Ling and Zhang, 2023). Chinese citizens remained apprehensive about both the disease itself and about the associated culpability and stigma that came with it.

In a curious way, prospective Chinese returnees found themselves aligning their daily practices with China's zero-COVID-19 norms and adhering to extended restrictions even while living abroad. As argued by B.L. (2023), overseas Chinese nationals planning to return to China 'constructed their identities as liminal subjects and separated themselves from the existing social structures' well in advance of their intended journeys. It was as if they had to lead parallel lives across time-space – while physically residing in the UK, they had to pre-emptively adjust to synchronize with Chinese temporal rhythms and Chinese moral social codes. Returning as COVID-19-free citizens meant that they would be acknowledged as innocent and harmless, as responsible returnees deserving reintegration into the Chinese 'we group'. Their commitment to self-discipline and compliance while living abroad showcased their capacity and willingness to be 'model citizens', effectively distinguishing themselves, as deserving compatriots, from the less deserving Other.

Conclusion

In a discussion of media portrayals of Ukrainian labour migrants during the pandemic, Tymezuk (2021) highlights how Ukrainian nationals were often blamed for 'bringing the virus back home'. He observes that while Ukrainian labour migrants were considered part of the national 'we', their presence 'in the dangerous outside excludes them from the imagined immunity' (Tymczuk, 2021, p 928). In a similar way, Chinese nationals embodied this ambiguity. Blamed for transmitting COVID-19 back home when the coronavirus was imagined to be a 'foreign virus' in Chinese society, returning nationals were recast as outsiders, as contaminated national subjects whose return would penetrate and weaken China's 'imagined immunity'.

On Chinese social media, the question of whether overseas Chinese should return for safety elicited divided opinion. In relation to the Zhihu post mentioned earlier, a comment with thousands of upvotes encapsulated the ambiguity around the identity of Chinese returnees: 'With a Chinese passport or ID card, you are indeed a Chinese citizen (*zhongguo gongmin*); however, this does not mean you are one of the Chinese people (*zhongguo*

renmin)' (comment by 'eAGp87', posted 15 March 2020). This distinction between a 'Chinese citizen' and a member of the 'Chinese people' illustrates how blunt boundary making within the 'we group' continued to separate self from the Other.

Chinese citizens faced difficulties returning home as they were not considered integral to the national identity amid the global health crisis. Stigmatization, fuelled by the perception of Chinese returnees as potential carriers of the coronavirus, eroded their sense of belonging. Such stigmatization resulted in their classification as 'foreigners', essentially a form of racialization that served to differentiate and exclude, due to not only the fear of the virus but also the politicization of pandemic nationalism. The movements and transnational journeys of Chinese individuals were viewed as perilous and transgressive, as their ambiguous mobility could compromise the biopolitical borders and jeopardize China's public and social health. Citizen returnees were therefore framed as unethical and selfish, and their prolonged immobility and commitment to self-discipline became a moral decision reflecting a distinct form of COVID-19 'ethopolitics' (Rose, 2001).

Notes

[1] The original video was quickly banned by Bilibili, on 24 May 2020, and 'Elephant Susan' reposted the same video on YouTube, attracting over 53,000 views. The video is available at: https://youtu.be/RwZ2CHmoeXE (accessed 20 April 2023).

[2] The question and responses are available at: www.zhihu.com/question/378706911 (accessed 20 April 2023).

[3] The original quote in Chinese is: '我们的国家当然不会放弃任何一个同胞。只要还是中国国籍，拿着中国护照，基于同胞情分，当然绝不可能拒绝，但也希望他们明确一下自己的身份，摆正一下自己的位置：逃避瘟疫也是逃难，逃难就要有逃难的觉悟。别以为去国外念了几年书，或者是拿了绿卡永居权，就真把自己当作回来做客的贵宾，当成必须要享受特殊待遇的人上人了' (available at www.zhihu.com/question/378706911, accessed 20 April 2023).

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