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Unsettled Belongings: Chinese Immigrants' Mental Health Vulnerability as a Symptom of International Politics in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to unique mental health challenges for Chinese immigrants due to their cultural, social and political ties with China, which responded to Covid-19 with controversial measures amid tensions with the Western world. These challenges manifest in three conditions at a time of crisis: racism that associates overseas Chinese with the coronavirus; Chinese immigrants' "double unbelonging" with regard to both host societies and China; and social disapproval of political criticism among overseas Chinese. This article examines these three conditions by drawing on ethnography conducted in Canada as well as international online media. It uses theories in humanistic psychology, existential psychology and hermeneutics to explain how, for Chinese immigrants, international political tensions are implicated in a range of mental health-related phenomena including identity, belonging, self-consciousness, shame, depression, and agency. Meanwhile, it offers theoretical discussions of how to make humanistic psychology more capable of addressing social and political issues.

Keywords: belonging, Chinese immigrants, Covid-19, identity, mental health, politics, racism

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Unsettled Belongings: Chinese Immigrants' Mental Health Vulnerability as a Symptom of International Politics in the Covid-19 Pandemic

Prologue: Mental health of Chinese immigrants in the Covid-19 pandemic

In early March 2020, I attended a roundtable about Covid-19 at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. The meeting room was so crowded that some audience members had to sit on the floor. The talks were well received, with one exception. During the Q & A session, a Chinese man expressed the view that the Chinese government had probably made as good a response as possible to Covid-19, one that no Western liberal government could rival. He also requested that the panelists, who had been critical of the Chinese government's coverup of the outbreak, analyze the matter "on the basis of evidence and facts, and not values." My two companions and I quickly exchanged glances, as this discourse sounded uncomfortably familiar to us as Chinese immigrants. During the entire roundtable I also noted that I had to keep reminding myself not to touch my face with my hands, a habit now important to avoid for the sake of personal hygiene, but surprisingly hard to break. That night, I dreamt that my palms were itchy; I scratched them, and to my horror, the skin began to peel off, revealing a dust-like black fungus all over my hands. I woke up suddenly, gasping and sweating, checking my hands to make sure that it was only a nightmare.

This was not my first night of poor sleep since the lockdown of Wuhan, the epicenter of the Covid-19 outbreak, on January 23, 2020. Having spent the first 24 years of my life in China before immigrating to Canada, I could not help spending two or three hours every day reading the news from China, desperately trying to find out how this calamity had occurred. My distress was shared by numerous Chinese immigrants around the globe. By late February, when the spread of Covid-19 began to threaten the rest of the world, many Chinese immigrants had already become

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emotionally drained by all the tragic events that had been occurring in China. As Covid-19 spreads ever more widely, Chinese immigrants relive the disaster, only this time it is closer to their homes in host countries.

Mental health as a symptom of international tension

The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 has, in Heidegger's (1962) words, arbitrarily thrown all of us into a new existential condition in which uncertainty, suffering and anxiety prevail. Although Heidegger originally applies the notion of being thus "thrown" to describe individual existence, it is possible to use it to shed light on circumstances we share on a global scale: we did not choose the pandemic situation, and once it came upon us, we had no escape from its harsh reality.

This new existential condition has given rise to various mental impacts, some of which affect a broader population than others. For example, my nightmare of fungal infection reveals a subconscious fear, one that I have never fretted over before, namely that the corporeal basis of my very existence might perish in the face of the invisible yet potentially pervasive coronavirus. From an existential perspective, my fundamental attachment to the corporeal body is shared by all human beings regardless of culture and ethnicity (Harrison, 2008). In light of the theory of hierarchy of human needs, it is only natural for human beings to suffer mental distress when their various needs are threatened by such disasters as the Covid-19 pandemic (Maslow, 1970; North & Pfefferbaum, 2013). Meanwhile, ethno-cultural minorities are generally more prone to mental problems for a variety of reasons, one being their weak identification with and sense of belonging in their host societies (Gao, In press).

The predicament of Chinese immigrants in the pandemic stems not only from the general factors described above, but also—and more notably—from their intimate cultural, social and political ties with China (Zhang, 2017), where the coronavirus originated and had the greatest

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initial impact. This affiliation is further troubled by the fact that China has been in conflict with the Western world over the past several years, subjecting overseas Chinese to an ongoing struggle between alternate senses of identity and belonging (Gao, In press). Thus, the indignant question from the Chinese audience member at the roundtable, as described at the beginning of the article. Chinese immigrants face a double “thrownness”, not only into a pandemic, but also into the unsettling corner of the multicultural world (Lai, 2003). The cumulative effect of this double thrownness is substantial. Prior to the pandemic, Chinese immigrants had various means at their disposal to perform identity work and smooth out the conflict between national loyalties (Pedone, 2011; Tsang et al., 2003; Wilcox, 2011). However, the Covid-19 crisis has now plunged Chinese immigrants into new existential predicaments, including when they are the butt of new forms of racist slurs, when their home country was guilty of initially covering up the outbreak of the virus, and when they debate on the usefulness of mask-wearing.

Specifically, I analyze three existential conditions detrimental to Chinese immigrants’ mental health: racism, double unbelonging, and the social disapproval of political criticism. First, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a new wave of racism against Chinese people, motivated not only by a perception of them as potential sources of infection, but also by the accusations against China regarding its responsibility for the pandemic. Second, I examine Chinese immigrants’ sense of double unbelonging in both their host societies as well as in China. Many Chinese immigrants endorse China’s hygiene practices and aggressive containment measures, and consequently lose confidence in the public health strategies of their host societies. At the same time, they find their return journeys to the home country blocked because of state-sponsored discrimination. Third, I focus on Chinese immigrants who suffer social isolation for criticizing the Chinese government.

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By examining the frustrations involved in political activism, I discuss the possibility of reconceptualizing depression and agency in social, rather than individualistic/biological terms.

So far, biological, experimental and quantitative research has accumulated a wealth of findings regarding the mental health of immigrants. Meanwhile, we also need conceptual tools to address the complexity of the pandemic situation. In this article, I use humanistic and existential psychology to explore the meaning-constituted nature of Chinese immigrants' existential condition. Further, I incorporate thought from hermeneutics, which is intimately connected with humanistic and existential psychology and may shed light on how overseas Chinese experience and make sense of their situations in the pandemic (Polyzoi, 1985; Rennie, 2007).

My analysis is distinguished from most others in humanistic and existential psychology in that I position Chinese immigrants' mental health vulnerability within the context of international politics. In the past, issues of international politics, such as apartheid and the possibility of nuclear war, have had an occasional presence on the margins of humanistic and existential psychology (Lambley, 1973; Wagner, 1985). Today, we are witnessing deglobalization, a process accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the trade war, among other events. Six decades after the founding of humanistic psychology, we need once again to bring international politics back into our analytic scope. To this end, I conceptualize individual psychology to be fundamentally embedded in the social sphere, expanding from interpersonal relations to intergroup relations and ultimately to cultural/national conflicts. Some of the concepts I focus on, including identity and belonging, are apparently oriented to the social. Others, including self-consciousness, shame, depression and agency, require more explanation. In order to fully explicate the social aspects of the mind, I borrow findings from a broader body of literature in the social sciences, all of which employs a social constructionist perspective. In so doing, I join the ongoing scholarly effort to move beyond

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the individualistic framework of humanistic psychology and expand its ability to address pressing social and political concerns (Hanley & Abell, 2002; Pearson & Podeschi, 1999; Saleem et al., 2019, 2019).

Methods and Data

This article is part of my ethnographical research on Chinese immigrants' experience of international tensions surrounding China. My fieldwork received approvals from the Research Ethics Offices of York University and Simon Fraser University. Although I launched this project with a broader scope in 2019, it gravitated since January 2020 towards the evolving Covid-19 crisis. Thus, this article covers the data I collected between January and August 2020. Overall, my database is consisted of three compartments: fieldwork observations, interviews, and media information, which are triangulated.

Fieldwork

In the early stages of the pandemic, I was able to attend university roundtables, community events, church gatherings and protests in Vancouver against the backdrop of Covid-19. After the implementation of social distancing in mid-March, I was no longer allowed to attend local events but at the same time found a plethora of online international events, which I attended selectively. At the latter stage, more community-support and mental health workshops became available. When attending these physical and online events, I made 30 pages of notes on the diverse ways in which Chinese immigrants responded to Covid-19.

Interviews and observations

My connections to international Chinese immigrant communities enabled me to take approximately 350 observation notes. Most importantly, I conducted interviews with 25

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participants from the greater Vancouver and Toronto areas, which are both highly ethnically diverse, with large populations of Chinese. I recruited my participants through posters, snowball sampling and targeted invitation among my circle of acquaintances. I verified that they all self-identified as cultural or ethnic Chinese and were at least 19 years old before admitting them to my study. Each participant was offered a \$10 gift card as a token of appreciation. The gender ratio was largely balanced (13 males and 12 females). The majority of the participants were new first-generation immigrants from mainland China who had lived in Canada for no more than 15 years. Nearly all participants had received (or are in the process of receiving) college education. Meanwhile, they represented a variety of occupations and citizenship status. I was the sole researcher to complete the whole study, including participant recruitment, interviewing, transcription, and analysis. I used Mandarin to conduct semi-structured interviews while encouraging my participants to freely discuss their pressing concerns related to Covid-19.

Online Media

I collected approximately 600 pieces of information from online news outlets and social media as far as the mental health of Chinese immigrants is concerned. Geographically, the media cover the five core Anglosphere countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the U.S.), continental Europe, and China. Regarding news outlets, I deliberately covered the whole range of political spectrum from, for example, the left-wing CNN and the Guardian to the ultra-right Fox News. As for social media, I used Twitter, Facebook, and the Chinese social media platforms WeChat and Douban. In my writing, I call the owners of the social media, along with the Chinese immigrants I observed, “observational subjects” to be distinguished from my formal study participants. Although it is impossible to capture exhaustively the avalanche of internet

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information available, data saturation was achieved when new information did not yield to fundamentally new findings.

Strategies of Analysis

When analyzing the data, I apply discourse analysis (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016) with a focus on distinctive Chinese diasporic experience during the pandemic. I use the data for three purposes. First, by triangulating fieldwork, interviews and media data, I identified general patterns of Chinese immigrants' mental health during the pandemic. It should be cautioned that Chinese immigrants display a great variety of responses to Covid-19 that cannot be possibly summarized in the scope of this article. That being said, my data clearly indicates a strong and common link between the mental health of Chinese immigrants and international tensions.

Building on the general patterns, second, I zoom in to examine eight individual cases in greater detail. Six cases from my participants shed light on how overseas Chinese appraised different public health approaches as well as the role of the Chinese government in the pandemic. The other two cases came from two public figures who shared online their experiences with racism in the U.S.

Last but not least, I use news coverage, including stories from both Chinese and Western English-language media, to delineate the process of the pandemic and China's changing relationship with the Western world. This context forms the larger picture in which my study of Chinese immigrants' mental health is embedded.

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Section One – Emotional responses to racism: Outrage, fear and shame

Results

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, racism against Chinese, or Sinophobia, has occurred worldwide. I observe that this wave of Sinophobia is very different from other forms of racism in that it overlaps with the trade war. In the context of the ongoing international tensions surrounding China, various political leaders, media and individuals have deliberately used the label “China virus” to attack China and, in so doing, have fueled Sinophobic sentiment. The majority of my participants and observational subjects reported experiences of being discriminated against by such politicized discourse circulating in media, instead of by racist harassment targeting them on an individual basis. For example, in his explanation of the responsibility of China in the pandemic, *Fox News* host Jesse Watters launched into an inflammatory depiction of Chinese people. He said: “Because they (Chinese) have these markets where they are eating raw bats and snakes. They are a very hungry people. The Chinese communist government cannot feed the people, and they are desperate. This food is uncooked; it’s unsafe.” This portrayal led to widespread outrage among my observational subjects.

While Jesse Watters’s broadcasted comment resulted in anger, other kinds of face-to-face racist harassment generated fear among the victims. According to *The New Yorker* staff writer Jiayang Fan, when a stranger bombarded her with the epithet “F***ing Chinese” outside her apartment one evening, she did not feel offended so much as overwhelmed by fear, to the point where, for a moment, she became breathless and could not make any sound at all. Worrying that this hostile person knew where she lived, she gave up her plan to stock food, even when she knew that a lockdown was imminent. It is noteworthy that, upon reflection, Fan concluded that what distinguished this racist encounter from her previous experiences is that the man seemed to

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genuinely mean what he said; the conviction in his voice seemed to imply that he had a moral right to attack her for being Chinese (Fan, 2020; Fan et al., 2020).

Shame is a third emotion experienced by Chinese and East Asians in response to discrimination. Andrew Yang (2020), a second-generation Taiwanese immigrant who was until recently a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the 2020 U.S. presidential election, revealed that, upon noticing a random stranger frowning at him, he felt “self-conscious—even a bit ashamed—of being Asian”. Similar to Fan’s sensitive perception of the racist abuser’s tone, Yang noted a subtle, fleeting unfavorable expression of a stranger at a time when the whole population was struck by the pandemic.

The experiences of outrage, fear and shame have spurred the racialized victims into actions. Yang implored Asian immigrants to actively aid the public health campaign in order to demonstrate that, in his own words, “we are not the virus, but we can be part of the cure”. Yang’s proposal incurred the criticism that it fails to identify the root cause of racism and instead holds the victims responsible. Yang’s internalized racism is shared among many of my participants and observational subjects. Fan, for example, confessed that over the past 27 years of her “probationary” residence in the U.S., her goal had been to mold herself into a shape acceptable to the country (Fan et al., 2020). But, internalized racism is not an unbreakable spell. Later, Fan treated her racist encounter to be a wakeup call for her to speak out and proclaim her status as a U.S. citizen.

Discussions

Terror Management Theory (TMT) may shed light on this new round of Sinophobia: due to an association with the origin of the coronavirus, the presence of Chinese individuals reminds other ethnic members of their own mortality, thus leading to avoidance and repulsion (Greenberg et al., 1986; Oaten et al., 2011). TMT entails a general pattern of explanation, in that it can be applied to

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many forms of discrimination, such as ageism, regardless of social contexts (Martens et al., 2005). My above research findings have demonstrated, however, that it is important to consider the social context in which the current Sinophobia takes place, namely that China is being held responsible for the origin of the pandemic at a time when its recent conflict with the Western world continues unabated.

The current Sinophobia operates by connecting international political tensions to issues at the heart of humanistic psychology, such as human dignity. Jesse Watters's comments, for example, invokes a denigrating image in which Chinese people are disease-ridden, act out of an animal instinct for survival, and lack human dignity, thus infringing on Chinese people's intrinsic need for self-respect (Statman, 2000). If Maslow's (1970) theory of hierarchy of needs provides a guide for individuals to strive for self-realization, Jesse Watters's comment does the reverse, positioning Chinese people beneath the very bottom of the hierarchy. In so doing, it accords Chinese people a "subhuman" status with the implication that they do not deserve human rights (Teo, 2020).

In order to effectively address the new challenges brought by international tensions, I argue that we need to expand the tools of humanistic psychology so as to better engage with the social aspect of human psychology. Hermeneutics can serve as part of an expanded toolkit. Seen from a hermeneutics perspective, which involves the interpretation of meanings, the political backdrop is not merely an add-on that intensifies the degree of Sinophobia explained by TMT; it instead injects new meanings into Sinophobia, both on the part of the racist abuser and of the victim.

Hermeneutics can shed light on the interaction between the racist abuser and the victim. According to it, as long as a speaker invokes politicized/racist accusations in a speech act, the targeted Chinese audience is obliged to interpret the speech as intended (Gadamer, 2004). Even

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though the Chinese audience could question the validity of the charges, there is no escape from their meaning and intent. For example, whether overseas Chinese accept Jesse Watters's depiction or not, they are already "interpellated" by it, to use Althusser's (1971) concept. The Chinese audience's situation is similar to the Althusserian subject who, upon hearing a police officer's hail of "hey, you there!", feels obliged to turn around and answer it. When Chinese audience hear Watters's characterization, they recognize themselves as subjects in a civilized society in which people are supposed to eat food in a dignified manner. It is based on such shared ideological recognition that Chinese audience cannot simply stay impassive to Jesse Watters's insult. In this regard, hermeneutics helps explain why verbal abuses can effectively deliver particular messages to their victims.

From a hermeneutic perspective, the meaning of a speech act is co-constituted by both the content and the social context of the utterance (Dore & McDermott, 1982; Gadamer, 2004). Consider Fan's interpretation that her abuser had a moral conviction when pronouncing the "F***ing Chinese" epithet. Certainly, one could note that Fan's perception may not be entirely objective. But, we must take the context into consideration. Given that the pandemic was the shared preoccupation for everyone in the city, it was only reasonable for Fan to perceive a tone of moral conviction in the abuse directed at her. Similarly, one might argue that it may not be fully valid for Yang to interpret the stranger's frown to carry racist undertone. But, I argue, his heightened attentiveness to a potentially adverse cue from an ethnic other reveals a widespread panic among Asian immigrant communities at this moment.

It should be clarified that hermeneutics can be used to analyze not only words, but also bodily expressions. In Yang's incident, for example, although the stranger's frown contained no verbal message, it nonetheless was a form of body language that delivers disapproval in the context

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of the pandemic. Hermeneutics can even be used to analyze the symbolic meaning of objects. In March 2020, a non-Chinese man in a Brooklyn subway train repeatedly demanded that a passenger of East Asian appearance move away from him, while for 15 seconds spraying a can of Febreze air freshener at this passenger from head to toe. The Metropolitan Transit Authority declared this to be a racist incident. What is striking is the symbolism of Febreze spray. That Covid-19 is a respiratory disease may make it possible for the racist abuser to imagine that his Febreze spray creates a protective wall in the air against coronavirus potentially being transmitted from the Asian-looking passenger. The odor-eliminating capacity of Febreze could further symbolize a purifying power to repel the infectiousness of the virus.

Hermeneutics can be combined with critical scholarship to analyze the function of emotional responses to racism. While fear and shame are common reactions to racism, they can be complicit in maintaining the racial hierarchy at the expense of the victims. For example, the frightened Fan not only experienced mental distress, but also lost her preparedness for the looming pandemic as she gave up her plan to stock food (Perrin, 2013). As revealed in Yang's reflection, shame usually contains an acute sense of self-consciousness which arises when one is exposed to the critical gaze of Others (Kwok, 2012; Mitchell, 2020). When shame is accompanied by additional detrimental mental conditions, such as a sense of self-inadequacy, embarrassment, low self-esteem, and social avoidance, it deprives the victims' ability to effectively respond to racism. In Yang's case, his experience of shame goes hand in glove with a sense of guilt, as if Asians are responsible for the epidemic in the U.S. Here, shame and guilt bolster internalized racism, an insidious component of racism requiring the victims to enact self-subjugation (Speight, 2007). That being said, we need to keep in mind that emotional responses to racism can be transient, and

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need not permanently prevent individuals from seeking positive changes. After Fan recovered from her initial shock and fear, she found the strength to combat Sinophobia by speaking out.

Section Two – Double unbelonging: Neither dwelling nor mobility

Results

In the above section, I have discussed how Sinophobia undermines Chinese immigrants' status in their host societies. Now, I would like to complicate this picture by discussing Chinese immigrants' sense of "double unbelonging" both in their host societies and in China (Rushdie, 2013, p. 54), as illustrated by their preference between different public health responses to Covid-19. Since the beginning of the pandemic, some of my participants followed the Chinese norm of wearing face masks. In Western societies, however, the standard practice has been that it is only sick people who wear masks, so as not to infect others. Thus, those who lack familiarity with this cultural difference have become confused at the sight of masked Chinese. According to online sources, the so-called "maskaphobia" has even led to some racist abuse targeted at masked Chinese, exacerbating Chinese immigrants' sense of alienation from the local community. When a research participant of mine noticed that he was the only mask-wearing person on a street in Vancouver, he felt he was sticking out like "a chicken without feathers".

Depending on one's perspective, whether the population accepts to wear masks or not can be seen as having an impact on the outcome of the public health campaign. Whereas non-Chinese may perceive the excessive use of masks to be panic-inducing, many of my mask-wearing participants and observational subjects, spurred on by the Chinese state's criticism of Western liberal individualism, considered the local people's refusal to wear masks to be an irresponsible choice that may potentially spread the virus (Gao, In press). From their perspective, they are essentially facing "the tragedy of the commons", where individuals act according to their own self-

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interest and end up being worse off than if they had acted as a collective. The lack of shared decision-making led to frustration and alienation among the mask-wearing Chinese (Gulbrandsen et al., 2016).

Since April, many Western governments began to concede that it is beneficial for healthy individuals to wear masks in situations where social distancing is hard to maintain. This policy reversal incurred further distrust among some Chinese immigrants. Two participants of mine, who had perceived Canada to be a haven from the repressive Chinese regime, began to feel entitled to accuse the Canadian health authorities of being not only incompetent but also deceptive. Whether such a charge is valid or not, it implies damage to the affected Chinese immigrants' subjective identification with the host societies. The damage was particularly severe when the Chinese immigrants perceived their personal safety being jeopardized by the policy measures. In contrast, China had largely put its epidemic under control. Encouraged by such news, nearly half of my participants, even without the opportunity to seek refuge to China, endorsed China's public health campaign while downplaying its troubling implications for human rights.

As internet sources and my interviews suggest, many overseas Chinese indeed made the effort to return to China, but their homecoming did not prove sweet. The Chinese government quickly realized that travelers from abroad were potential carriers of the coronavirus. In response, it nimbly implemented stricter border controls to discourage overseas Chinese from returning. This officially endorsed concern also influenced public opinion in China: Chinese returnees began to be criticized for having supposedly brought risk to China, and for taking advantage of the country's medical resources. A saying gained phenomenal popularity regarding overseas Chinese: "Useless in the development of the homeland, unparalleled in delivering poison by traveling thousands of miles".

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The callous attitude of the Chinese state and public struck not only at the returning individuals but also overseas Chinese in general, many of whom had diligently purchased masks from all over the world to donate to China in the earliest phase of the pandemic. For whatever reasons they had decided to live abroad, my participants generally maintain a deep sense of attachment and belonging to their homeland (L. S. Liu, 2014). The hostility from China has led to varying levels of anxiety, stress, and a sense of betrayal among my participants and observation subjects (Chin, 2020). One participant, after being stranded overseas for several months, displayed severe psychotic symptoms, such as speaking to the wall and asking fruit whether they feel pain when he eats them.

Discussions

The above findings indicate that many overseas Chinese now find themselves facing double unbelonging: in addition to their difficulty identifying with the host society, they experience the overwhelming sense that they have been abandoned by their home country. Belonging contains two aspects: belonging as a discursive resource that constructs forms of social-spatial inclusion/exclusion, and belonging as a personal, intimate feeling of being at home (Antonsich, 2010; Vandemark, 2007). In my research findings, overseas Chinese face double unbelonging in both aspects. On the one hand, they are shunned in both the host societies and China to the point that they no longer enjoy full access to social spaces. On the other, they are emotionally alienated in both societies. If well-being is based on the dynamic synthesis of “dwelling/mobility”, these Chinese immigrants can neither dwell with a sense of peace and rootedness, nor move with a feeling of flow and possibility (Todres & Galvin, 2010).

Rushdie (2013) originally describes double unbelonging to be a state of the migrated self who, while not fully a member of the host community, mourns the loss of its cultural root. The

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migrant self is intrinsically heterogenous and lacks a sense of authenticity. The double unbelonging of overseas Chinese is different from Rushdie's analysis. What my participants and observational subjects face is not just a lack of cultural rootedness, but also anxiety, stress, and mental disorders caused by social exclusion (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; DeWall et al., 2011; Stillman et al., 2009; Williams, 2012).

Further, if the state of "cultural homelessness" described by Rushdie is a result of cultural displacement (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999, p. 6), the double unbelonging I have discussed is brought about by international tensions and the Covid crisis. These grave contexts clearly manifest themselves in Sinophobia and in China's border closure against inbound Chinese. As my findings suggest, even as tiny an object as the face mask can trigger conflict at our time of crisis. At a normal time, the cultural practice of mask-wearing could simply be a quirk to be amused about. But now, confronted with the existential threats, mask-wearing has become a measure of self-preservation, and, due to cultural difference, a racialized marker over which intergroup conflicts escalate (Jonas & Fritsche, 2013; Landau et al., 2011).

As the cultural minority, Chinese immigrants are disadvantaged in the intergroup conflicts. When my mask-wearing participant compared himself to a featherless chicken, this comic portrayal revealed his feeling of uneasiness for having violated the norm defined by the dominant culture of the host society. Standing in the street, he displayed a heightened level of self-consciousness, one he generated by objectifying his masked face under the gaze of the dominant culture. This was the case, even though this participant did not agree with the negative perception of mask-wearing and did not assume any responsibility for wrongdoing to himself (Crozier, 1998). This inextricable self-consciousness fulfils a normative function by disciplining the unsanctioned cultural practice of mask wearing (Rochat, 2015).

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The crisis brought by Covid-19 has also fueled authoritarian thinking, as reflected in many Chinese immigrants' preference for China's drastic public health measures over the value of human rights in their host societies. This phenomenon should not come as a surprise to readers of Fromm (1941), who famously argues that individuals may experience the tendency to escape from freedom. To this end, individuals may submit to or identify with an authoritarian system that would free them from uncertainty and the responsibility of choosing. An escape into authoritarianism is especially likely in times of crisis such as now, when personal safety is under threat.

Section Three – Political criticism: Agency and depression

Results

If the previous section depicts some Chinese immigrants' attempt to escape from Western pandemic centers in a passive-reactive light, let us not forget the important lesson from humanistic psychology about human agency. In this section, I shift to Chinese immigrants who actively hold the Chinese government accountable for its problematic responses to Covid-19. Due to space limitation, in the following, I focus on the story of one unique participant to explore the frustrations and setbacks she encountered when expressing political criticism. This story is not broadly representative, but it permits an in-depth inquiry into the mental struggles involved in political activism.

Charlotte (pseudonym) grew up, studied, and worked as a medical researcher in Wuhan. When I asked Charlotte if I could reveal in my article that she comes from Wuhan, she replied, "Please add that my family members, friends, and colleagues are all in Wuhan." No other expression can better illustrate Charlotte's deep attachment to Wuhan than this resounding answer, fully twelve years after immigrating to Canada, where she became a nurse, and has been recently combating Covid-19 herself on the front lines. In other words, Charlotte has an intimate connection

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with Covid-19, both through her early life trajectory and through her professional duties today. Thus, it is not surprising that as of the very first day of the Wuhan lockdown, Charlotte fell into a severe depression. She was confined to bed for four days, before she managed to return to work. Even then, her depression did not go away. In her own words:

[I] have turned fragile, hypersensitive, and agitated. Go to work, get off from work, sleep, check my cellphone nonstop, suddenly wake up at midnight, check messages, chat with my (Chinese) classmates and friends, and go back to sleep again. Anxiety, hope, disappointment, worry, sadness, crying out loudly and uncontrollably; I have never experienced anything like this in my lifetime.

Charlotte's depression was filled with anger towards the Chinese government's poor responses to Covid-19 in Wuhan. Naturally, she started having conversations with new Chinese immigrants around her in the hope that, given their shared background, this peer group might provide emotional support as well as political solidarity. However, Charlotte rarely found her political criticism shared by her peers:

There are so many Chinese here, all kinds of circles, but none of them appear to be as anxious as I am. They sing various cheerleading, celebratory songs, which end up infuriating my already agitated heart. Like an enraged lion, I argue with everyone.

It should be noted that Charlotte is not a particularly argumentative person. Before the pandemic, she was fully aware of the Chinese popular practice of self-censorship and refrained from openly debating political issues. However, the plight brought by Covid-19 led her to break her rules, leading to miserable confrontations. Instead of gaining social support, Charlotte ended up becoming socially isolated because of her political opinions. This social isolation has further added to her grief: her peer immigrants have become complicit in the state-sponsored neglect of the

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suffering of the Wuhan people. After bitter arguments with Chinese around her, Charlotte announced: “What else can I say? I’m tired, exhausted, I am quitting this group. You keep singing; I don’t have any energy left to join your chorus.” She unfriended many contacts in her social media and deleted all her postings from the past several years.

Discussions

My broader fieldwork suggests that Charlotte has underestimated the existence of Chinese immigrants critical of the Chinese government. In reality, there are many dissident networks and individuals across the globe. A participant of mine, despite his vast familial connections with the Chinese Communist Party, stood up to criticize it for its initial attempt to cover up Covid-19 and the subsequent ruthless lockdowns. In so doing, he displayed a critical consciousness that is not bound by his ties with political authorities (Maslow, 1970). In this case, as well as in Charlotte’s story, we observe human being’s agentic capacity even in a time as difficult as we are experiencing (M. Yang, 2020). Instead of always passively reacting to stimuli in the environment, human beings are capable of exercising agency to enact changes in the environment for the better (Bandura, 2006; Saleem et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, Charlotte’s political activism was to no avail. This setback requires us to rethink the site of agency. In his famous discussion of human agency, Bandura (2006) cautions that agency is not located solely in the individual mind. Here, Charlotte’s situation demonstrates that agency is often a relational achievement (Gergen, 1999). It often proves to be challenging, for example, for battered women to leave their abusive relationships—the apparent source of their sufferings—because such an action would require a conducive social-structural condition (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007). In her activism, Charlotte, too, lacked the relational and institutional

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support necessary for her to continue to exercise agency (Cleaver, 2007). Jiayang Fan, in contrast, has been able to use her position at *The New Yorker* to spread her words out against racism.

Charlotte not only failed in her activism, but also paid the heavy price of having isolated herself from overseas Chinese circles. The identity accumulation hypothesis maintains that as social identities give meaning and guidance to behaviors, identity loss tends to generate mental distress (Thoits, 1983). To Charlotte, the identity loss was particularly tough, as overseas Chinese have been a precious network for her, a new immigrant, given their shared language, cultural habits and migration experiences. The social and mental risks involved in political activism can explain why, as my fieldwork reveals, many overseas Chinese would rather not voice their dissatisfaction with the Chinese government. Here, social isolation serves as a powerful mechanism in preventing activism.

Finally, it is worth commenting on Charlotte's severe depression, which cannot be explained in biomedical terms. Instead, it stemmed from Charlotte's emotional, existential concern for the wellbeing of the most important individuals in her life. In Cvetkovich's (2012) words, Charlotte displayed a form of "political depression", a condition that has political rather than biological causes. Because of its socio-political etiology, Charlotte's depression cannot be truly removed by either biomedical treatment or counselling (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Vermes, 2017). Charlotte was fully aware that the real cause of her distress lies in a tragic reality, one for which the Chinese government is largely responsible. Her consequent criticism of the Chinese government is both a political action and a self-healing process. Mixed with worry, anger, and confusion, political depression may discipline the affected individuals, at the same time it has the potential to foster dissent and protest. Concerning the latter aspect, political depression contains much critical potential, thus contrasting sharply with the positive self-helping subjectivity that

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neoliberal, therapeutic cultures construct to transfer the government's burden to the individual (Teo, 2018; J. Yang, 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the unique mental health vulnerability of Chinese immigrants because of their sociocultural ties with China, at a time when it has become heavily implicated in the Covid-19 pandemic, all the while engaging in ongoing conflict with Western countries. While the international tension intensifies the conflict between different cultural identities and senses of belonging among overseas Chinese, the existential crisis brought by Covid-19 deepens the identity split. In particular, I examined three existential conditions detrimental to new Chinese immigrants' mental wellbeing: racism against overseas Chinese in association with the origin of the coronavirus; some Chinese immigrants' "double unbelonging" due to their disagreement over Western public health approaches, compounded by discrimination meted out by the Chinese government; and the social disapproval of political criticism among new Chinese immigrants.

I argued that the mental health challenges Chinese immigrants face are linked to a range of psychological phenomena: identity, belonging, self-consciousness, shame, agency and depression. While identity and belonging are apparently related to international political tensions, the other mental processes require more explanation. Thus, I borrow from social constructionist theories to expand theories in humanistic psychology, existential psychology, and hermeneutics, in order to bring out the social aspect of these psychological phenomena. From a social constructionist perspective, overseas Chinese subjected to racist slurs cannot escape their meaning, because the labels already create a shared ideological recognition of national/cultural identity. Self-consciousness and shame are socially oriented mental states, generated through the gaze of Others. Agency and depression, too, sometimes have a social ontology and thus cannot be reduced to an

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individualistic framework. All these mechanisms often contribute to the racial divide and to international political struggles, and occasionally demonstrate critical, disruptive potential. Through social constructionist discussion, I intend this article to join the ongoing scholarly endeavor to expand the capacity of humanistic psychology to address pressing social and political issues.

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