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Beyond hypervisibility and fear: British Chinese communities' leisure and health-related experiences in the time of coronavirus

Abstract: This paper examines British Chinese communities' lived experiences of leisure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data that inform this paper are based on my ongoing ethnographic research with British Chinese students in two supplementary schools in the United Kingdom (UK) about their leisure and health-related experiences (supported by Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship 2019–2020). The current findings are discussed in relation to my field notes, interviews with the students and their significant others from the schools, and social media sites that report on Chineseness and COVID-19. Results include the participants' change of lifestyles; fear and the pandemic; experiences of racism in relation to their leisure; and leisure and solidarity among Chinese communities. As a Hong Kong Chinese Australian researcher situated in the UK, I have an “insider and outsider” positionality which have an impact on data collection with the participants amidst the pandemic.

Researching with British Chinese Students and Leisure

Boy (12-year-old): You can't just blame the Chinese, only because they're the ones that started the virus in China. (15-2-2020, face-to-face interview)

Parent (mother): The media needs to educate ALL people not to relate the virus only with the Chinese. Just like would you say all Blacks have Ebola, or AIDS? Of course not. This is the same racial mentality. This is how the society has constructed fear towards the Chinese. (19-4-2020, telephone interview)

There are many lessons to be learned, losses to grieve, and uncertainties to bear during the COVID-19 pandemic. But one thing is clear: there is not just one pandemic but two concurrent pandemics. One is the virus, but the second one that is closely tied to the first, is a pandemic of Othering of Chineseness. There is an uncanny parallel between the discourses of the “Yellow Peril” at the end of the 19th century and the current coronavirus where the Chinese/East Asians are positioned as a threat to the Western world, bringing to light racial inequalities that have long taken root in society (Author). For example, a recent survey about the pandemic showed that one in seven people in the United Kingdom (UK) would avoid contact with people of Chinese origin/appearance (Beaver, 2020). The British Chinese student participants in this study attend Chinese language and cultural activities classes at weekend Chinese supplementary schools. These schools have traditionally been regarded as an important social, cultural and political context for British Chinese students and families to accumulate social and cultural capital and provide a safe space for them to escape from everyday racism (Archer & Francis, 2006). With the closure of the schools amidst the pandemic, the British Chinese communities are arguably deprived of their established social networks. This deprivation is coupled with a historical backdrop of living within an intersection of isolation and

otherness associated with limited visibility and is underpinned by a lack of cultural representations and academic discussions (Author).

Research on the Chinese diaspora's leisure is predominantly based on quantitative/survey or once-off interview methods; for example, in Canada (Walker, Halpenny, Spiers & Deng, 2011) and America (Huang, Norman, Ramshaw & Haller, 2015). These studies offer a limited analytical understanding of the younger Chinese students' leisure-related *experiences* which this paper will examine. This research focuses on two Chinese supplementary schools in Leeds and Manchester (UK) where I am conducting my ongoing ethnographic research with the British Chinese students (11-15 years old) and their significant others regarding their leisure and health-related experiences¹. The content analysis is based on my field notes, ongoing interviews² with the students and their significant others from the schools, and social media sites that report on Chineseness and COVID-19.

How Does Fear of the Pandemic Influence British Chinese Communities' Leisure?

A discourse of fear is a common thread amongst the data. The fear is coupled with boredom as the students are not allowed to go to the Chinese schooling during the lockdown, whilst at the same time, being overwhelmed by constant news reports on social media, and worrying about their vulnerable relatives in China, Hong Kong and Malaysia. As a School Principal said:

The Chinese community has become more nervous, some has lessened their contacts, and it affects the community lifestyle. We seem to be living alone and get really nervous even when a person just sneezes. Our Tuesday's opera has stopped for 3 weeks because they

¹ The students vary in their home locations within the Yorkshire and Lancashire regions; birthplace (England, Mainland China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR)); language use patterns at home (from English only to a mixture of English, Malaysian, Mandarin, Cantonese); parents' birthplace (Malaysia, HKSAR, Mainland China), and day school attendance. Ethical clearance for the research was gained through the university and from the gatekeepers, students and adults.

² The interviews before the lockdown were completed face-to-face at the field sites. During the lockdown, interviews are conducted online or over the telephone by snowball sampling method, and an online ethnographic platform was used to collect a third phase of visual, audio and text data with three students.

don't want to see each other, they've stopped yum cha³ too. (15-2-2020, face-to-face interview)

Despite the ongoing worries, overall, they acknowledge being content and safe at home with their families, with some parents and children appreciating this quarantine as a down time to rejuvenate and to catch up on lost sleep. The families are acutely aware of the social and political happenings surrounding the pandemic and at times feel quite helpless about the situation, particularly when they perceive the government is not enforcing high-level preventive and protective measures. This crisis situation has created an impetus for one Chinese parent to contemplate about her life and rethink where her "home" is:

Mother: I'm seriously thinking of going back to China for good. Here they don't even have enough resources to cure their own British people, how will they have the resources to cure us, the second-class citizen? (19-4-2020, telephone interview)

Leisure, Families and Chinese Schooling

Research about leisure scholarship has highlighted that parental leisure time spent with children is crucial for their wellbeing and development (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Since the schools had partially closed down in mid-February, the students' weekly schedule had changed, compared to the research interviews conducted in 2019. During April's Easter break and lockdown time, some of their leisure has become more homogenized as they are spending more time playing video games. This "home-based digital leisure" (López-Sintas, Rojas-DeFrancisco & García-Álvarez, 2017) not only helps them to "kill time" but also plays a part in essential online grocery shopping for their parents.

³ A style of traditional Cantonese cuisine involving Chinese tea and dim sum, a small bite-sized portion of food.

Some families are spending more quality time together doing backyard football or squash and trying out new recipes and preparing for meals. One family whose mother is a dancing teacher consciously provides a creative and active environment for her three children such as decorating/painting the walls so that they do not indulge in video games or become sedentary. Her child said she enjoys doing “PE Joe”⁴ in the morning and kickboxing classes online and making creative family videos using TikTok⁵. Several mothers highlight they are pleased that their husbands and children are offering to “help” with the housework which was taken-for-granted as a “mom’s” job before the lockdown. In these families, there is an increase in leisure sharing experiences and family bonding during this time of the pandemic (Craig & Mullan, 2012). These newly found leisure times and spaces seems to be a safe haven from the two concurrent pandemics, and have rearranged how housework, groceries and childcare responsibilities are shared at home.

About one month before the social distancing rules were enforced in England, many students and parents had resisted attending the Chinese schools, and class numbers were significantly reduced. They thought it was the Chinese people who started the virus, and with some families traveling overseas during the Chinese New Year in February, that they could return carrying the virus. Arguably, the Chinese supplementary schools can be seen as akin to the students’ “weekend families” providing them with the space to socialize, take up cultural activities and develop Chinese cultural identity. The pandemic has shifted this “weekend parenting” responsibility from the schools to the parents. In order to avoid the burden of ongoing negotiations about daily activities, a few families set up strict timetable schedules in order to help their children develop a routine during the lockdown. One parent was worried that his son might gain too much weight without the weekly swimming class, and therefore his timetable included a daily 3km run on a treadmill, a fruit and vegetables only diet for snack time, and no iPad time before homework and exercise. The timetable is an important “discipline technique” (Foucault, 2012) to manage their

⁴ A live series which Joe Wicks, a fitness coach runs online fitness routines.

⁵ TikTok is a Chinese video-sharing social networking service founded in China in 2012.

children's behavior at home. This regulation of space and time is enforced with parental surveillance regarding the son's leisure behavior and tied to a "body at risk" discourse (Author). Another family, however, gave up following the timetable after three days as they struggled to wake up early for "work" as usual. Despite the challenges of being "normal" in a pandemic, the families feel privileged in that they have sufficient spaces at home and an income to carry out a variety of activities that help to maintain sense of stability. While the current data are difficult to ascertain how social class impacts on Chinese families' leisure, their narratives about financial security allude to the support from their families overseas and long-term investment and saving (which some said the White British lack this culture) and the government furlough scheme.

When Fear Becomes Racism and its Impact on Students' Leisure

The coronavirus seems to act as a catalyst for these families to more openly discuss racism, and specifically that aims at Chinese people, something previously silenced. There seems to be a shift to the normalized Chinese docility⁶ when some parents consciously taught their children to speak up against racial inequalities using an example of Chinese people wearing masks in London and being attacked on the street. A few students have personally experienced racist jokes, such as being called, "you're the virus", from their peers at school. The students are aware that the current heightened racism has deep roots in the UK, and that this coronavirus has provided a fertile breeding ground for its further, more overt, manifestation in society:

Boy (12-year-old): I think now people, those who are not Chinese, they see the coronavirus as a further chance to racially abuse the Chinese. It's like there's an increase to racial abuse now. They have another weapon to like aim at you. The previous one is like the standard small eyes. (15-2-2020, face-to-face interview)

⁶ When compared to other ethnic groups in the UK, the Chinese have been perceived as the "minority among minorities", "quiet" or "reserved" (Author).

The families do not seem to be deterred individually by this overt racism and media-induced moral racial panics from outdoor activities; nevertheless, they expressed worries about racism towards the Chinese community more generally. As a result of social distancing, the students' friendship networks and leisure spaces have changed, and new virtual friendship facilitated by racialization in online networking platforms.

Girl (11-year-old): The Chinese school has a WeChat group where parents talk about things. There was this person whom I know, and her White Dad said don't be friends with this Chinese girl as he doesn't want his daughter to get the coronavirus. I feel sad and I'm not friends with this person anymore. (15-2-2020, face-to-face interview)

The topic of face masks sparks interesting discussion; the students question the controversies around its protection from coronavirus, and issues related to maskaphobia and racial gaze (Fanon, 1967). They critically address the cultural differences regarding the adherence to mask-wearing and their subjectivities in being in a public space:

Boy (12-year-old): Apparently when you wear a mask, it sends a signal to the White people, it's like you've got the virus. Because the Chinese wear masks in order to prevent from spreading it, as you don't really know if you've got it or not which is different to the White people. (15-2-2020, face-to-face interview)

One of the students extends this cultural difference to the work ethics and governance between China and England:

Girl (11-year-old): In China, people will follow the lockdown rules but in England they will protest against it. China has such a strong government and they can control everyone. In

England, people are slow in setting up things, like they can't build as fast as in China. It took three years to build a library here while it took four days to build a hospital in China. (15-2-2020, face-to-face interview)

Solidarity and Leisure in Chinese Communities

Being a Hong Kong Chinese Australian researcher and residing in England, my position in this research field, since COVID-19, has become somewhat precarious. For example, I learned that one of the schools has been bombarded with media press invitations to talk about the impact of the pandemic on their students which they had turned down. I, too, might be positioned as an outsider akin to those journalists about whom they have concerns that the facts may be twisted. On the other hand, being an “insider” has allowed the ongoing research to be enriched by my everyday connections with my Chinese communities locally and globally. Despite a growing tide of anti-Chinese sentiment in the UK and across the globe, the Chinese communities are resilient in fighting the two concurrent pandemics. I am touched by their solidarity, enacted through speaking up against injustice in academic (University of Westminster, 2020) and online forums (Lai, 2020); donating resources to care homes and the NHS; and sharing Chinese Complementary doctor contacts available for online consultations related to COVID-19.

Mother: My friend's husband got the virus. He couldn't get help from the NHS as he's not feeling that ill. He got better as he's got help from a group of Chinese medical doctors in treating the virus on this WeChat group we shared in the school. The UK government can't help us, but we've got Chinese medicine which can help. (19-4-2020, online interview)

While there is hope for a vaccine that could limit the virus in the near future, what some have called “the second pandemic of racism”, exacerbated by the media (Campbell, 2020; Day, 2020), will

involve a lot of rethinking and education to lift its impact. The longer-term impact on students' leisure and health-related experiences is summarized by a School Principal's note:

The biggest issue is not the actual virus, but the exclusion, bullying, abuse, and racism. Once you've got it, you'll become scared and lose confidence and hope which will have a longer-term impact on these students' health and leisure experiences. (17-4-2020, telephone interview)

Conclusion

The crisis situation sparks an "awakening of consciousness" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133) about the racialization of British Chineseness that has long been invisible in leisure scholarship and the UK society. This consciousness evokes anxiety and triggers an array of reimagination related to the participants' senses of belongingness and the return to their ancestral homeland; and resistance against racism (physical, verbal and symbolic) that was once silenced in their habitus and entrenched in the pre-COVID-19 structure. Their senses of time and space have reframed the rhythms of everyday life for familial leisure that is underpinned by their socio-material culture (the intersection of resources, technology, and work). As solidarity forges worldwide beyond local contexts, the needs to alleviate the fears and bridge the chasm between the "European reality" (Kinnvall, 2015) and Chinese reality are ever more important. Spivak (1998) reminds us that representation is not only a matter of speaking about but also speaking for. As Gilroy (2005) notes, the "postcolonial melancholia"⁷ (Gilroy, 2005) has enabled the residual colonial desire, such as China as the "backward other" to continue to colour perceptions of Chineseness. This short paper speaks for British Chinese communities' leisure and health-related experiences that are silenced and/or misrepresented by a resurgence of fear and hypervisibility amidst the pandemic.

⁷ The denial of the violence of the colonial past provides the fertile ground for racism that penetrates everyday cultural practices. "A mass lamentation of the loss of colonial power, played out through alternating bouts of racist hostility and collective guilt" (in Kinnvall, 2015, p. 158)

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