Fears and hopes: Chinese university students in Italy during the first wave of Covid-19

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Abstract: In recent years, Chinese students have enjoyed a prominent presence in the Italian higher education system. A recent survey conducted by Uni-Italia shows that Chinese students account for 24% of non-EU students in Italian universities. When the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) erupted in Italy at the beginning of 2020, panic spread quickly through social media; numerous fears, generated by the tide of information available online, permeated the Chinese university student community in Italy. This chapter first analyses the problems encountered by Chinese university students in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic, and then introduces the artistic and cultural response from within that same community. Such forms of creative response also shine light, more generally, on a growing Anti-Asian sentiment in Italy. Despite the enormous challenges posed by Covid-19, Chinese university students in Italy have developed a mode of communication that builds bridges between different cultures—quite different from "mass media" or "major news outlets"—because it is personal, honest, and intimate.

Keywords: Covid-19, Chinese student, Italy, art, anti-Asian racism, intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

By any measure, 2020 was extraordinary. The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019 soon spread to all countries across the planet. The pandemic disrupted people's pace of life: factories shut down, schools closed, planes were grounded, and so much more. The pandemic forced people to enter a state of isolation with little warning or any clear sense of when that isolation might end. At the same time, digital technology and social media was being used on a large scale to help people understand the pandemic and to fight the spread of the virus. From smart working to distance learning, the pandemic brought people into a new state of digital life (Vargo et al. 2021). The kind of spatial isolation caused by pandemics not only means that the pace of daily lives changes completely, but also that people's usual social habits and ways of being in the world are dramatically interrupted, inevitably leading to increased anxiety and other troubles for all who are impacted (Zhai and Du 2020).

When Covid-19 broke out in Italy, misinformation caused panic to spread among Chinese students living abroad (Depoux et al. 2020). There was discrimination against Chinese and a recognition of the differential treatment, by Ital-

ians, of people from other countries. There was the relatively optimistic attitude towards the virus at the beginning, followed by a rising pessimism as the country went into a policy of national lockdown. The young Chinese university students in Italy, far away from their homeland, endured a series of unprecedented difficulties.

This research will examine the *liuxuesheng* 留学生[1] in Italy during the pandemic. This group was chosen as the object of research because they responded in a remarkably creative way, despite experiencing severe adversity during the Covid-19 pandemic, to make their voice heard to the Italian society in which they live. Primary examples of this response, explored in the proceeding pages, include videos recounting their experience during the lockdown in Italy and art documentaries showing the attitude they adopted in dealing with discrimination.

The cultural responses of Chinese students in Italy demonstrate the importance of international students and their unique capacity to contribute to intercultural communication in a range of ways. Simmel introduced the concept of the "stranger" in 1908, arguing that the "stranger" is not someone who comes today and leaves tomorrow, but is, rather, someone who comes today and stays tomorrow. The "stranger" is not a native of a particular group yet continues to engage with that group, gradually spreading her own culture of origin (Rogers 1999). This viewpoint establishes an important foundation for intercultural communication by emphasizing the various ways that different cultural identities interact with and influence one another. The Chinese *liuxuesheng* 留学生 in Italy described in this chapter are part of this group of "strangers."

Furthermore, looking closely at various channels of communication, we find overseas Chinese students communicating in largely interpersonal ways, which has distinct advantages. This kind of communication is characterized by spontaneity and autonomy. It is naturally relational, and its naturalness can ensure that information is transmitted effectively (Caughlin and Basinger 2016).

2. Being *liuxuesheng* in Italy during Covid-19

In recent years, the number of students studying abroad has been on the rise. In 2011, the number of Chinese students studying abroad ranked first in the world, up to 339,700, accounting for 14% of the global total (Liu 2016). Since then, China has maintained its position as the world's largest "exporter" of foreign students. China also enjoys a prominent position in the Italian higher education system (Song 2013). A recent survey conducted by Uni-Italia shows that Chinese students account for 21,81% of the number of non-European students in Italian universities (Naldi et al. 2022).

During the pandemic, Chinese students in foreign countries experienced spatial isolation, leading to feelings of anxiety and helplessness. In addition

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[1]   In Chinese, the term *liuxuesheng* is used to indicate Chinese students studying abroad, foreign students, or exchange students. In this chapter, *liuxuesheng* refers to Chinese university students in Italy.

to general worries about the pandemic, they had specific concerns about how Covid-19 would impact their life and studies abroad, not to mention the difficulties they faced in returning to China. On top of these mounting anxieties, Chinese students also experienced discrimination in Italy and were marginalized on Chinese we-media[2] (Liu 2020).

When the epidemic first broke out in China, some Chinese students in Italy immediately faced discrimination and exclusion. By February and March 2020, when the situation in China had improved and the infection levels in Europe were high, many foreign students decided to return to China. This move to return home to China, along with certain behavior[3] exhibited by some Chinese students who had re-entered China from other countries, was the primary cause of the criticism and marginalization of the group of Chinese *liuxuesheng* in we-media. Given this, Chinese students faced a double pressure, both abroad and at home (Chen and Ju 2020).

From the outbreak of the epidemic in China at the end of 2019 until today, the experience of overseas Chinese students can be divided into three stages.

1) The first stage lasted from the end of 2019 until the beginning of 2020. When the epidemic broke out in Wuhan and attracted global attention, a host of Chinese *liuxuesheng* and overseas Chinese did everything they could to find and buy pandemic prevention supplies in Italy, which they tried their best to transport back to China.

2) The second stage started in March 2020. At this stage, the situation in China had improved, but the virus suddenly began to break out in European countries and in America. In just a few weeks, the epidemic became a pandemic, spreading from Spain and Italy to the whole of Europe and the United States, which became the hardest hit area of all. At this time, Chinese *liuxuesheng* in Italy suddenly realized that the threat of the virus was close to them. From the temporary suspension and postponement of classes at the beginning, universities quickly moved to remote teaching. Many Chinese students in Italy were at a loss, and their parents, who were far away in China, were very worried, calling for their children to quickly return to China. To prevent the cross-border spread of the disease, however, European countries closed their borders and reduced or even cancelled international flights, making it difficult for Chinese students to

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[2] "we-media (also known as self-media) is an Internet platform. It allows users to write articles and publish videos, each with their own identity. we-media platforms are classified into three types based on their content format: text-based, video-based, and audio-based. Aside from traditional we-media platforms such as blogs, live streaming platforms and self-made funny video platforms are gaining popularity." Definition provided by Research and Market 2021. Commonly used Chinese we-media platforms include DouYin, Kuaishou, Xiaohongshu, etc.

[3] After returning to China in February 2020 some students did not actively comply with the rules imposed during quarantine, thus creating numerous conflicts with medical personnel on duty at the quarantine facilities. For example, some students asked to go out for a run during the quarantine, and some complained that bottled mineral water was not provided in the quarantine hotel. See Shishixin (2020).

return home. Whether to pay sky-high prices and take risks to return to China, or to stay in Italy, became a dilemma for many Chinese students. The *liuxuesheng* who chose to return to China at this stage caused heated discussions on Chinese social media, especially when the parents of 166 Chinese students in the UK jointly asked China to send a special plane to pick up their children and when individual overseas students did not abide by the quarantine regulations after entering China. Chinese social media was rife with criticism for those who had returned. For a time, the group of *liuxuesheng* was labeled and marginalized (Lin and Zhang 2022).

3) Spanning the second half of 2021 until the present day, the third stage has been characterized by seeking a balance between pandemic prevention and control, on the one hand, and a return to learning and life, on the other. As COVID-19 continued to persist throughout the world, rules to ensure its prevention gradually became the norm in many countries. Italian universities released enrollment plans for the new semester, and all of them offered the possibility to take in-person classes. Chinese students faced new problems: could those students who had returned to China continue their studies if not physically in Italy? How would students who had been staying in Italy arrange their future studies and life? Some *liuxuesheng* initially had the possibility of working part-time while in Italy, but because of the impact of the pandemic, it was very difficult to study and work at the same time.

Along with the pressures and difficulties cited above, instances of racial hatred and discrimination also occurred (Ho 2021). As we will see in the following section (3), from the beginning of 2020 until today, many *liuxuesheng* are concerned about ongoing discrimination. Many who suffered racial profiling during the pandemic believed that the malice brought about by their 'Asian face' was not caused solely by Covid-19. Chinese students consistently reported that many people who already harbored anti-Chinese emotions took advantage of Covid-19 to express their prejudices openly.

Despite this direct expression of racism, Chinese students in Italy did not keep silent but spoke out, building their self-image in various ways: through diaries, videos, we-media cultural works, documentaries, and more. Many students recorded their own personal experiences of Covid-19 and the global public health crisis it caused. By increasing understanding and raising awareness, more people could reflect on and even participate in the social conditions of Chinese people living overseas. The works conveyed by *liuxuesheng* through we-media reflect their personal lives, unique attitudes, and intimate thoughts. Their offerings provide a revealing glimpse into the perspectives of many Chinese students on China, Italy, and the world at large.

3. Questionnaire and analysis

To investigate the problems encountered by Chinese students in Italy during the two years of the pandemic, I developed a questionnaire survey in the fall of 2021 at the University of Florence and Campus CIELS in Padua. Completed ques-

tionnaires were submitted anonymously and included a total of 20 questions in Chinese. They were divided into four parts: basic personal information (name, age, etc.), experiences during the pandemic, details about student life, and confrontations with discrimination. The questionnaire contained multiple-choice and open-ended questions; the latter allowed respondents to participate more actively and make nuanced reflections on the phenomena under exploration. Among the 100 Chinese students who participated at the two universities, 67% were female and 33% were male. Undergraduate students accounted for 78% and graduate students accounted for 22%. The students were between the ages of 19 and 29.

March 2020 marked the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy that led to the closure of the whole country. At the time, I was an adjunct professor at two different Italian Universities. As I have a Chinese ethnic background, I suddenly received a large number of emails from Chinese students asking about distance learning, exams, graduation, and even about the urgent need to return to China (thus reflecting their concern about their situation in Italy). To have a clear understanding of the practical difficulties and specific needs faced by Chinese students in Italy during the pandemic, I conducted the survey described above for Chinese students at the two Italian universities where I was working.

The survey results showed that during the first and second stages of the pandemic, the most common concerns of overseas Chinese students were:
1) being infected with the virus (93% of the total number of participants);
2) that the pandemic would affect their study plans (85% of the total number of participants);
3) being unable to return to China (80% of the total number of participants);
4) being subjected to racial discrimination (76% of the total number of participants). Their answers are listed from the higher to the lowest concern.

In terms of the first concern, "infection with the virus," the vast majority of Chinese students felt tension and anxiety; they expressed concerns about the prevention and control measures taken by the Italian government. These fears tended to emerge in the following respects:
• 89% of Chinese students did not know much about the health system in Italy;
• 79% of Chinese students were worried about the high number of new infections per day as the pandemic continued;
• 28% of Chinese students believed that Italy's control was not strict enough, leading to pandemic rebound.

"Academic impact" ranked second, with 75% of surveyed Chinese students expressing worry that their studies would be affected. This was seen in the following ways:
• 86% of students were worried the pandemic could not be effectively controlled in a short period time and that the resumption of classes was distant. Additionally, it was difficult for them to adapt easily to remote teaching because of the language barrier, so they could not keep up with the progress of their courses.
• 39% of students were worried the pandemic would affect their graduation plans.

In third place was "unable to return to China." From the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy in early 2020 to the survey conducted in 2021, the pandemic had reached several peaks and the state of emergency had been prolonged again and again. Therefore, most overseas students hoped to return to China as soon as possible where they could join their families. The rising cost of airline tickets, however, and the cancellation of many flights during the pandemic period created significant hardship for Chinese students trying to return home. Among the students who participated in the survey:

- 64% had a strong desire to return home;
- 23% of students worried about the change in Italian immigration policy, which would lead to their inability to return to Italy to continue their studies as scheduled. This made many reluctant to return to China;
- 13% of students believed that choosing to return to China when the world was not completely out of the pandemic would cost a lot in terms of both money (sky-high airfares) and time (extensive quarantine after entering China), so they had no intention of returning to China soon.

The fourth issue was discrimination. Chinese students studying abroad feared they would face increased discrimination during the pandemic; unfortunately, this worry proved well-founded. In fact, more than 60% of Chinese students surveyed said they had been discriminated against to varying degrees during their pre-pandemic lives in Italy. This phenomenon became more apparent and widespread after the Covid-19 outbreak. In response to this phenomenon, Chinese students actively and creatively constructed their self-image through art and other cultural forms of expression: they published diaries, filmed videos, and made documentaries so that their voices could be heard and prejudiced assumptions about them might be effectively challenged. As we will see in the next part of this chapter, it was also during the first two years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021) that young Chinese students living in Italy expressed their identities by drawing on their own cultural values and traditions.

The questionnaire asked specifically about the help that Chinese students most need now, in the fall of 2022. The problems that they deemed most urgent are: 1) increasing the number of flights to China to help *liuxuesheng* return home; 2) offering more academic and administrative guidance and assistance at universities; 3) providing psychological counseling and support.

The results of the questionnaire also reveal that overseas Chinese students, who have little knowledge of the Italian university system, want more help and clearer guidance from universities when it comes to the complex administrative aspects of admission, registration, and so on. The approach taken by the University of Padua is highly commendable; the registration office at the University of Padua has a desk dedicated to Chinese students, and since 2004, the University of Padua and the Provincia di Padova have signed a formal cooperation agreement to establish SAOS (Servizio Accoglienza Ospiti Stranieri), which creates an accessible path for immigration matters to reach

the university administration—a great convenience for both international students and academics.[4]

The psychological problems of Chinese students cannot be ignored, especially in the context of Covid-19. The results of the questionnaire demonstrated that very few of the Chinese students surveyed had taken advantage of the counseling services offered by the University of Florence, and more than 80% of participants were not even aware of its existence, this means that there was a gap in the available services and the outreach of the universities to make them more accessible to foreign students

4. Italy-based Chinese artist collective: WUXU

When compared with the SARS era of 20 years ago, we see that the development of the Internet, the rise of social media, and we-media has not only accelerated the spread of information but has undoubtedly played a positive role in promoting freedom of speech for every citizen (Guo et al. 2017). At the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese Italian minority made a loud appeal through social media, trying to expose the plight of racial discrimination faced by overseas Chinese and their community response. The hope was to help people understand the extent of this widespread problem (Pedone 2020). In addition to raising awareness within Italian society, encouraging people to confront the spread of Covid-19 directly and objectively, the Chinese in Italy also responded to the situation through art.

Liuxuesheng in Italy organized a powerful cultural response to Covid-19. The 4xDecameron *Sishi ri tan* 四十日谈, created by WUXU,[5] is a group of Chinese students and young artists living in Bologna who joined together at the beginning of 2020 to establish a cultural association. WUXU's homepage describes itself as follows:

> WUXU is a research non-profit association founded in Bologna in 2017. WUXU focuses on the realities of Italian social life, Europe-Far East cultural exchanges, interdisciplinary research, and contemporary art practices. WUXU aims to build an independent researcher's alliance which is well-connected and inclusive. At the same time, through its work, the organization aims to establish its own distinct and active role in the workings of Italian society.

When a Chinese speaker sees the two Chinese characters for the word *wuxu* 务虚, meaning "utopian" or "abstract," another word that often comes to mind is the opposite of *wuxu: wushi* 务实, which means "pragmatism." In Chinese, the word *wushi* has two meanings: one is to devote oneself to real or specific things, and the other is to be practical. People who have studied contemporary Chinese

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[4] Università degli Studi di Padova. [N.d.]. "SAOS Desk." <https://www.unipd.it/saos>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

[5] WUXU. [N.d.]. "Homepage." <www.wuxu.info>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

literature may associate the word *wuxu* with *Wuxu biji* 务虚笔记 *Notes on Principles*, the first novel published by contemporary writer Shi Tiesheng 史铁生 (1951–2010) in 1996. This novel is composed of 22 paragraphs and describes the impact of social changes in China since the 1950s on its fictional characters: disabled C, painter Z, teacher O, poet L, doctor F, director N, etc. (Chen 2017).

5. 4xDecameron

According to the description of WUXU's founder, Zheng Ningyuan 郑宁远 (1989), 4xDecameron 四十日谈 is a project meant to "let more and more people participate in and reflect on the events and phenomena caused by the emergency of Covid-19." The name of the project 4xDecameron was inspired by Boccaccio's Decameron, which literally means "work of ten days." The 4xDecameron is a "work of forty days" relating to young Chinese people during the pandemic. The project uses a famous portrait of Boccaccio in medical protective clothing as its logo. 4xDecameron is addressed to all Chinese people living in Italy who do not understand Italian and therefore could not acquire information from the local media.[6]

The 4xDecameron project also highlights the psychological vulnerability among people of Chinese origin during the spread of Covid-19 and creates a narrative by linking individual experiences. A project of this kind could be considered as a social activity that disseminated values and useful information by taking advantage of social media and organizing volunteer groups. After Covid-19 broke out in Italy at the beginning of 2020, participants in the project spontaneously translated news and policies relating to the Italian situation into Chinese and disseminated the information to Chinese people in Italy through their official WeChat account. This community activism provided psychological comfort to people of Chinese origin who were in a state of greater fragility, precisely because of their Chinese origin, during the spread of Covid-19.

As the project developed, the 4xDecameron team collected diaries, videos, and other original works of Chinese students living in different Italian cities and made public the fears, difficulties, hopes, and feelings of Chinese students trapped in Italy. The purpose of this form of artistic expression was to reach out to Italian society and raise awareness so that people could empathize with the plight of Chinese students and overseas Chinese immigrants in general.

To facilitate this empathetic goal, the 4xDecameron project produced a series of videos, most of which were vlogs shot by Chinese students in various Italian cities, each one averaging about two minutes in length. They show the daily life of Chinese *liuxuesheng* during quarantine in Italian cities. The authors of the videos are Chinese *liuxuesheng* living in Milan, Florence, Bologna, Rome, Naples, Pisa, Ferrara, and Prato. In their vlogs, these Italian cities are no longer

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[6] 四十日谈 4xDecameron. "Homepage" [Facebook page]. <https://www.facebook.com/4x-Decameron>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

represented through their famous squares, grand cathedrals, and popular tourist attractions; instead, the videos portray scenes of "everyday life," dramatically restricted by the rules in place to end the pandemic. Viewers see deserted streets, empty stores and restaurants, long lines at the entrance of the supermarkets— and everywhere, passers-by wearing masks. Chinese students from all over Italy actively participated in sharing these powerful images.

Through this artistic expression, students recorded their "normal" life turned upside-down because of Covid-19, out of which, a distinctive view of Italy under lockdown emerged. In this way, Chinese university students in Italy, a group of "strangers," communicated to Italian society their attitude toward and experience of the pandemic, as well as their concrete practices while living in lockdown. These artistic representations, in turn, built a bridge of intercultural communication. Young Chinese students in Italy used self-media as an innovative element in making their voices heard—a mode of communication proving to be very effective and widely accepted, especially by young audiences who are now used to transmitting and receiving information via the Internet.

One video in the series collected and produced by WUXU for the 4xDecameron project, "Stuck with the body, prostheses in the soul: Chinese *liuxuesheng* under the pandemic" (2020),[7] attracted widespread attention. This 17-minute video is a collection of remote interviews with eight students who returned to China immediately after the outbreak and eight Chinese students who chose to stay in Italy. The interviews are conducted in Chinese and the video is subtitled in Italian. The following is a brief part of its introduction:

> In February 2020, COVID-19 broke out in Italy. Various forces emerged during the pandemic which created a thick barrier between those foreign students who stayed in Italy and those who returned to China. Students who stayed chose to wait and see how the world would change in Italy, while students who returned home took on the risks entailed with such a long and fraught journey. It is difficult to say whether this barrier is a means of isolation or protection—and indeed, this remains unclear. Information and security relate not only to the virus but also to our future. 4xDecameron invited students from both sides of this barrier to answer 12 questions. Let's listen to their thoughts and hear about their experiences.[8]

The students who participated in this interview lived in Italy for a period ranging from 6 months to 7 years. There is no detailed introduction to the city where interviewees are now living nor do we learn of their academic disciplines; what we do know is that all the students who chose to stay in Italy are studying or working at home, and the students who chose to go home to China are quarantined in hotels.

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[7]   The original title in Italian is "Studenti cinesi ai tempi del Corona: Incastrati con il corpo, protesi con l'anima;" in Chinese is *Gekong qunuan yu wuchu taoli* 隔空取暖与无处逃离.

[8]   Video available online: <https://www.facebook.com/4xDecameron/videos/247820976358972>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

The questions posed in the video can be divided into three categories. The first category of questions is directed to those students who returned to China (e.g., did they receive strict health examinations on their way back? What are their feelings after returning?); the second category of questions is directed to those students who chose to remain in Italy (e.g., Did they stockpile disinfection supplies, food, etc.?); the third category, the one with the most questions, is for all the Chinese students interviewed. From the answers to these questions, we see some clear differences between the answers given by the two types of students. For example, when students are asked to use three adjectives to describe their mood, the most frequent words among students who stayed in Italy are: nervous, uneasy, and anxious; among the students who returned to China, the most common words are calm, relaxed, and warm. Most of the students who returned to China left Italy at the end of February and early March 2020. The students who stayed in Italy say they are very homesick, and when the outbreak began, they all planned to return home—some even bought tickets—but later, for various unexpected reasons, the flights were cancelled, and they could not leave.

The two types of students also give significantly different answers to questions about concerns surrounding the pandemic: students who stayed in Italy are worried about the health of their classmates and friends; they express worry about supply chain issues and resulting shortages of resources; they worry that they will not be able to go home for an extended period; they worry that Italy will be trapped by the pandemic for a long time; and they worry that the pandemic will have an impact on Italy's already fragile economy. The students who returned to China, conversely, are not worried because one person's strength cannot change anything. They just hope everyone will work together to overcome the pandemic as soon as possible.

The interviews take place in March 2020, as Italy began to shut down and implement various laws to stop the pandemic. This was a time of great tension across the country. In stark contrast, many cities in China had no new cases and were slowly returning to normal life. The different attitudes in the video are obviously caused by the different national contexts in which the students find themselves. On some other issues, however, the views of all the interviewed students are roughly the same. For instance, on the closure of Italy, all the Chinese students say it is the right decision and that the closure is long overdue, as it is the only way to end the pandemic. The policy to lockdown affirmed the Italian government's determination to fight the pandemic, which influenced the decision of some students to stay in Italy, momentarily giving up the idea of returning to China. The students agree that the pandemic prevention measures taken up by the Italian government are both strict and reasonable, but they also believe that Italian people are generally not taking sufficient responsibility.

In universities, most of the Chinese students interviewed do not demonstrate any enthusiasm for online classes and many even express resistance. They believe that online classes are a superficial and ineffective way of learning. Some

students think it is inconvenient to use a VPN for online classes in China, and some students think that online classes cannot meet their learning needs because of the particularity of their majors (for instance, art majors).

The most common sources of information for Chinese *liuxuesheng* used in the video are WeChat, Weibo, Huarenjie,[9] translations published on the official account of the Chinese Students and Scholars Union in Italy (CSSUI), and some WeChat public accounts, such as the translation of Italian official documents by 4xDecameron and official media outlets. Analysis of the data generated by the project reveals that "official media" refers to China's official media. Participants believe that the Italian and Chinese media adopted different perspectives and attitudes in reporting. In their view, "foreign media" (that is, Western media), writes groundless stories and publishes news that discriminates against the Chinese, resulting in a higher degree of trust in the Chinese media. The theme of ethnic prejudice also emerges in the video, if indirectly, when all the interviewed Chinese students express that their greatest wish is to have more tolerance and understanding, and less prejudice and discrimination. Anti-Chinese prejudice, we will see, is the main theme of another project by WUXU: the documentary, *Racism is a Virus* (2021).

6. *Racism is a Virus*

Discrimination against different groups triggered by Covid-19 has been a topic of concern for the media and the public. The Secretary General of the United Nations pointed out in the "Policy Brief on Covid-19 and Human Rights" that since the outbreak of the pandemic, the instability and fear caused by it are intensifying existing human rights issues, such as discrimination against certain groups (*UN News*, 2022). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, E. Tendayi Achiume, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on minorities, Fernand de Varennes, also reported a rise in attacks on minority groups worldwide due to Covid-19.

In a creative response to discrimination, Chinese students produced an art documentary entitled *Racism is a Virus*, developed within a bigger project called VulCa2021. VulCa2021 is the nickname of the project: "Documenting Vulnerability and Care during Covid-19-induced Anti-Asian Racism and Violence in Italy and Canada." This was created and developed by Chinese Studies scholar, Valentina Pedone (University of Florence), along with Italian Studies scholar, Zhang Gaoheng (University of British Columbia). The project was funded by the Canada Italy Innovation Award (received by Pedone). The production of the documentary was entirely delegated to a team of artists from the WUXU group (Jin Fansong, b. 1994, Wang Yihan, b. 1995, Zheng Ningyuan, b. 1989) along

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[9] The website Huarenjie.com, founded in Paris in 2006, has expanded its business to Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. It is a website aimed at sharing resources and content with the broader Chinese community in Europe.

with a team of students from the two universities involved. The team of students included individuals of Chinese descent from different cultural backgrounds.

The documentary is based on interviews with people of Chinese heritage in Italy and Canada. Some of the selected subjects are *liuxuesheng*, some are Chinese born but raised in Italy or Canada, and some are children who emigrated to Canada or Italy with their parents. Interviewees speak Chinese, Italian, or English and their majors, educational backgrounds, and social contexts are different. What they have in common are Asian features—features that make them equally subject to prejudice and discrimination.

At the beginning of the film, the team of students developing the project agree on which topics are most relevant and plan together what materials to gathered. The content collected by students is divided into two types: interviews and self-narrations. The students interview their friends and classmates, but unlike traditional interviews, the people they shoot do not face the camera directly while speaking, nor are they answering an explicit question. Instead, they tell their stories naturally and informally, expressing their ideas as if the camera did not exist.

The videographers carefully record the characters' small movements, the surrounding environment, and all the elements of scenes they believe to be worth recording (e.g., shots of a rainy day somewhere in a city). Some students also chose to be part of their own creations and themselves become the narrative's protagonists. Starting from their own experiences and emotions, they use a first-person perspective to tell their stories and those of their families and friends around them. By describing their individual experiences of discrimination and their particular modes of resistance to it, their videos offer practical strategies to viewers that might help to guide actions in the future.

Members of WUXU participated in the post-production of the documentary and helped to edit the stories recorded by the students, a collaboration that resulted in a powerful documentary. The students who shot the material were not professional filmmakers and had no prior training. They merely accepted some suggestions put forward by WUXU at the beginning of the project.

Although it is difficult to compete with the knowledge and skill of professionals, after months of effort and cooperation, their production screened in October 2021 and was extremely well received. This short documentary film has no single director nor a single author. Each creator independently chose his or her own focus, narrative rhythm, and heart. As an honest and humble production, the documentary resonated powerfully with its viewers. The topics were full of emotion and authentically portrayed; without fixed or prescribed requirements for how it was shot, the creators could narrate and edit freely based on their own ideas, their individual experiences, and available resources.

This freedom allowed distinctive and heartfelt stories to emerge. The students who created this documentary were in different countries and different cities, but the documentary revealed the common threads connecting the lives of all Chinese students; despite the different locations, the individuals often seem to be caught in the same context, the same time and space. This generated a remarkable sense of integration and aroused empathy in the audience.

The short film produced within the 4xDecameron project and the one produced for VulCa2021 are very different in terms of theme and form of expression. The former revolves around the theme of "pandemic," while the second around discrimination, labels, and anti-Asian hate. However, it is not difficult to see from the words of the Chinese students in the two works that the shadow of prejudice is everywhere. This theme is the common ground between the two works. Ethnocentrism is a form of prejudice. Recall that many Chinese students believed that the reports from China's official media outlets were true and reliable during the pandemic, while those from Western media were "groundless." People see other people and foreign cultures through glasses tinted by their own cultural milieux and tend to evaluate them from within their own frames of reference. This results in distortion, misunderstanding, conflict, and the isolation of one culture from another (Elias et al. 2021). From the descriptions given by Chinese students in Italy, we can see that prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination have existed for a long time, but the pandemic made all this more evident and far more serious.

7. Conclusions

Forms of intercultural communication and collaboration, such as those considered in this chapter through projects of exchange and resistance, provide critically relevant responses to anti-Asian racism in Italy and elsewhere. Through cultural and artistic expression, Chinese *liuxuesheng* in Italy actively raised their voices during the pandemic, participating in the ever-important process of cultural production and transmission. As the research presented in the preceding sections has explored, creative responses to Covid-19 provide nuanced opportunities to better understand the significance and influence of contemporary Chinese students studying abroad.

First of all, international students combine the roles of communicator and receiver. Their dual identity makes the interaction between two different cultures clearer and more broadly representative. Although the group of Chinese university students in Italy are beginning to trend younger, most still complete higher education in China and average between 20-30 years old. Most grew up in China, within a traditional Chinese culture; Chinese is their mother culture, and they identify strongly with its core values.

When these students study abroad, they move from their native culture to a foreign one. As representatives of Chinese people, their words and deeds, as well as any communication and exchange with local residents, constitute cross-cultural communication. In order to adapt to foreign life, integrate into the local culture, and communicate with local residents, foreign students must be familiar with local language ideas, customs, preferences, taboos, and other cultural expressions. Their extended experience in two cultures, home and host, makes their understanding of cultural differences more acute. Their dual identity of communicator and receiver allows them to spread their mother culture naturally and easily through interpersonal interaction. In addition, due to the dual

identity of Chinese *liuxuesheng*, the transmission of what they see, hear, and feel is based on first-hand experience and thus the content of the dissemination is more authentic and vivid (Wu 2021).

Studying abroad, at its apotheosis, is inherently open and inclusive. The studies and general life of foreign students in a multicultural society require them to become accustomed to putting themselves on the line, taking risks, and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, this communication must be guided by the language and culture of the country where the foreign students are living. Foreign students need to adapt their ways of thinking and means of emotional expression. This can lead to tolerance and increased empathy in interpersonal communication.

One finds Chinese *liuxuesheng* throughout all levels of society. In daily life they have relatively equal status of others with whom they have developed relationships and made friends. The individual role of *liuxuesheng* is distinguished in important ways from that of the Chinese government; the information they convey will not be immediately labelled as "propaganda," and people will be more willing to accept what's conveyed as legitimate and trustworthy. Therefore, interpersonal communication is more powerful and effective than many more formal and established news outlets.

Our data shows that the audience of Chinese *liuxuesheng* is mainly composed of young people who have long been used to accessing news and information via the Internet. Their media habits make them the group with the most active thinking; they are the most capable of integrating new information and ways of understanding, and they tend to be the ones with the broadest and most international point of view. Young audiences increasingly rely on the Internet for information, and teenagers especially prefer social networks to traditional news outlets. The use of social networks is an extension of interpersonal communication and a virtual form of it. Chinese *liuxuesheng* communicate their feelings through the Internet; online they can share with people what they care most about and convey their own culture and values, in both explicit and subtle ways.

In this kind of special cultural exchange, those involved tend to be relatively open. Internet users freely choose the topics or news in which they are interested. They not only pay attention to the people immediately around them, but they also pay attention to news in the larger world, often brought to their attention by online personal connections to friends across the globe. They are open to and actively participate in the spread of culture through online means.

The fear and confusion that people feel in the face of the unexpected and the unknown—manifested in recent years by Covid-19—has increased misunderstandings and conflicts between cultures. At the same time, by way of virtual storytelling and different means of connecting online, intercultural communication has thrived and been an important factor for mitigating increased fear levels. From 2020 onwards, offline activities were subject to various restrictions, and we lost many opportunities for intercultural exchange. Luckily, through creative projects developed and shared via the Internet, Chinese university students in Italy have made meaningful contributions to intercultural communication.

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