



## Outsider Within

Young Chinese Feminist  
Activism in the Age of  
COVID-19 in the United  
Kingdom

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked increasing racist violence against Chinese communities in the United Kingdom. In this essay, two UK-based Chinese feminists discuss their first-hand experiences while campaigning against racism during the crisis. While constantly suffering from oppressive structures, constraints, and limits as 'outsider within' British society, they describe how they managed to expand the scope and depth of their campaigns and build connections with feminists and anti-racist activists across borders and boundaries.*

In early February 2020, COVID-19 sparked increasing racist violence against Chinese communities in the United Kingdom. In response to this, we as Chinese feminists who study in the country initiated a campaign called ChineseAgainstRacistVirus. Along with coordinating posts on social media, we organised a public protest in London's Trafalgar Square. Four months later, the death of George Floyd in the United States reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement around the world. In response

Detail from the poster of  
the Food Conference held  
at SOAS in February 2020.  
PC: Chen Xiaotao.

to BLM, we coordinated another campaign, called ‘Chinese4blacklives’. Through these actions, we constantly experienced marginalities and vulnerabilities from our multilayered identities and the entangled global political environment in which we are living.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) described this marginality as the ‘outsider within’. In her writing, marginality is described as ‘an excitement to creativity’ for African-American female intellectuals to challenge the white male hegemony in knowledge production (Collins 1986: 15). While learning from Collins and other black feminists, we found their theories liberating and illuminating for our Chinese diasporic feminist organising in the United Kingdom. However, Collins missed an opportunity to unpack the ways in which the excitement for social action was constructed and mobilised. To fill this gap, this essay unravels the ways in which the motivation to organise public antiracism campaigns for feminists in Chinese international student communities was constructed and shaped during the pandemic. We argue that the pandemic provided us with a political opportunity to accumulate our motivation to organise through these campaigns. As such, we transformed from international students detached from British politics to activists involved in British social movements.

More than three decades after Collins published her work, we hope our activism against racism will enrich the position of the racialised ‘outsider within’ beyond the specific context of the United States, by infusing it with a diasporic and transnational feminist perspective that can advance our understanding of the complexity of a global politics that is becoming more and more entangled.

## Feeling the Pain from the Margins

As a result of racial injustice, Chinese international students have always been outsiders in British society. However, the pandemic has fully exposed the previously latent racism, motivating us to organise public antiracism campaigns.

At the beginning of the pandemic, wearing masks in public triggered several cases of micro-aggression and even violence against some people of East Asian appearance in the United Kingdom. According to The Guardian, Chinese students at UK universities were ‘fleeing back to China’ amid concerns about the British Government’s handling of the pandemic and an increase in racist attacks triggered by ‘maskaphobia’ (Weale 2020). As these violent incidents became a part of our daily experience on public transportation, in accommodation, universities, and working areas, our group felt anxiety, fear, and pain. However, we were unsure whether we should label these incidents racist, since most of us were quite confused about what racism was and what constituted racist behaviour.

At a loss as to how to make sense of our new reality, our daily discussions in our WeChat group were what helped us clarify our situation. We debated how to respond, ultimately deciding to adopt ‘protest’ as our approach to combat racism. One member argued that we should first win respect and trust from local British people through self-discipline and restraint, because some British people imagined Chinese people had been travelling in China and were therefore vectors of the virus. They also argued that it would not be helpful for us to term these incidents ‘racism’ or to label ourselves as ‘victims of racism’, proposing instead that we regard these behaviours as a ‘lack of respect’.

These arguments sounded very familiar to us Chinese feminists. Many of the participants in the antiracism campaign were from our UK-based Chinese feminist group, VaChina. Some of our members who have taken part in the #MeToo movement in China since 2018 could see clearly that this type of self-disciplining shares the same logic as classic ‘victim-blaming’. During the #MeToo movement in China, a group of feminists started a campaign on Weibo under the hashtag #NoPerfectVictim (#我也不是完美受害者), in which they aimed to challenge the culture of victim-blaming that is often scripted in online discussions of rape charges (Yuan 2019). From that campaign, we learned that victims do not have to apologise for the sexual violence they



### Novel Coronavirus, Racism and Food culture Workshop

- Time: 02/02/2020, 3-5 pm
- Venue: SOAS, Main building, Room 459

This workshop responds to the outbreak of coronavirus racism across the UK and other countries. It aims to provide historical and anthropological perspectives on this phenomenon. It also intends to provide a safe space for Chinese students in the UK to discuss the influence of the outbreak of this virus on themselves. Chinese students of all origins are welcome.

Please register here: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/novel-coronavirus-racism-and-food-culture-workshop-tickets-921793298577aff=ebdssbeac>

Picture credit to: 廖小娟



[Left] Poster for the Food Workshop at SOAS. PC: Instagram account @Chineseagainstracistvirus.  
[Top] Logo for the Instagram account 'ESEA [East and South-east Asians] Against Racist Virus' (formerly known as 'Chinese Against Racist Virus'). Designed by Jojo.

have experienced. Similarly, as victims of racist violence, we do not have to discipline ourselves to win respect from local people, nor do we have to educate British society about why it is wrong to discriminate against Asians who wear masks.

It was not the act of wearing facemasks that triggered these violent attacks, but our racialised bodies. In fact, anyone who even looked Chinese could be a victim of racism, with many other East and Southeast Asian people subjected to racist attacks during the pandemic (Williams 2020). We fully understood that this struggle was not just for us as Chinese, but for anyone who was suffering from racism. For this reason, when we were designing the advertising for our protest, we came up with the slogan: 'Join us in protesting racism against Chinese, East and Southeast Asians!' We were fighting not only against racism towards our Chinese communities in the United Kingdom, but also together with people from all other affected groups.

## Chinese Diaspora Activism from the Margins

While developing our collective consciousness in understanding the racism we observed and experienced in the United Kingdom, we transformed our identity from Chinese international students detached from the country in which we were living to residents deeply engaging with local society. With this new identity, we quickly mobilised to take part in various forms of action. These actions constantly pushed us to discover the boundaries of our activism along with some limitations due to our outsider-within status. Our agency as Chinese diaspora activists manifested itself in our campaign, as we were constantly exploring the potential of our activism and the possibilities of building solidarity with other groups. As argued by Mengyang Zhao (2020), our activism might not be able to

change even a fraction of the whole picture, but these efforts provided viable ways for us to organise critical interventions in a divided world.

The whole campaign started with a workshop on racism, imperialism, and Chinese food culture at SOAS University of London on 2 February 2020. Realising that we should take more action as soon as possible, we then decided to run a public protest in Trafalgar Square. For our feminist and queer members, the square had been a place to meet and to participate in London's annual Women's March and Pride Parade. By locating our public protest there, we embraced the political legacy of protesters in Britain and integrated our resistance into the social movement history of this country. However, we noticed that those participating in the public protests that we joined in Trafalgar Square were predominantly white. Therefore, our presence as an ethnic minority in this square had another political meaning: to challenge the pre-existing racial hierarchy of public protests in Britain.

To prepare for this protest, we established a working committee with 14 members. However, we immediately experienced some challenges. Specifically, although we had limited media resources for public exposure, we had to decline the interview requests coming from some journalists—especially those working for Chinese state-owned media agencies who are accustomed to serving conservative nationalism—as we were concerned our campaign would be portrayed as a patriotic action. As Chinese international students, our voices and actions had political meanings, and it was a challenge to ensure our campaign was neither reductively represented as a patriotic action nor subsumed by political agendas in the West. In a word, faced with a global media environment charged with increasingly conflicting political agendas, we had very limited channels through which to send an accurate and effective message to the public.

However, the preparation work for the protest was hindered not only by various practical challenges in the United Kingdom, but also by the depressing political news coming from what was then the centre of the COVID-19 crisis, China. Although we were physically detached

from our country of origin, our daily lives were entangled with the political realities there. On 6 February 2020, after hearing of the death of the whistle-blower Dr Li Wenliang, we experienced tremendous shock, sorrow, and anger. We could not accept the fact that such an innocent and noble person had lost his life after he had warned people around him about the coronavirus. Many of us suddenly felt that the antiracism campaign was no longer that important to us. The preparation work for our protest was halted due to this news, which none of us could process. We realised that our situation was complicated by the multiple locations with which we were connected, and the politics around these locations.

After a simple vigil at SOAS for Dr Li, we resumed our commitment to our antiracism campaign. Before the protest, we advertised our event on social media to attract more people. In short order, one established antiracism organisation expressed interest in supporting us. However, we were told by a British Chinese friend that this organisation was accustomed to using other organisations' campaigns to promote their own political agenda.

With this warning in mind, we dealt with this organisation with extra caution. Before the protest, we asked them not to bring their own pamphlets or materials when they joined in. They promised they would respect our organisation; however, on the day, when we saw them (mainly middle-aged men of various racial backgrounds) in Trafalgar Square, we immediately noticed that they had brought with them piles of pamphlets and several posters. Their agenda was to condemn racism by opposing the conservative government in Britain, whereas we felt this focus on party politics would not really address the institutional racism embedded in British society. We first tried to negotiate with them, telling them that if they still wanted to support our campaign they should put away their own campaign materials. We even suggested that if they wanted to promote their own agenda, they could keep their distance from us. Although they promised to respect our organisation, when we were busy giving out our leaflets and stickers, they immediately took out their own materials. We discussed this with them again but in vain.

In addition, we were worried about possible police intervention to stop our protest. Without any previous organising experience in the United Kingdom, we relied on information from the internet, which proved to be insufficient. We assumed we were allowed to demonstrate with our posters anywhere in the square, as long as the action remained peaceful. However, several minutes after we started, we were approached by two police officers. They told us that the area in which we were standing was not open to public protests. We were anxious and worried at that moment that we would be chased away or even fined. Luckily, they did not drive us away; instead, they directed us to an area that was open to protests.

These incidents made us realise that we were outsiders even within the ecosystem of antiracism organisations in the United Kingdom. The organisation that coopted our protest was actively involved in British politics and their agenda was to oppose Boris Johnson's administration. They were also better funded than us. Before the protest, we knew it would be difficult for us to build solidarity with other organisations, but we did not expect there would be a hierarchy among antiracism organisations that would leave us in a marginalised and vulnerable position during our protest. In short, the presence of the other group not only made us feel uncomfortable, but also brought obstacles to our protest.

As Guobin Yang (2000: 398) highlights, 'contemporary social movements in Western democracies are often indistinguishable from institutional politics—they can be routinized and bureaucratized to the extent of becoming part and parcel of institutional politics'. As a grassroots organisation constituted mainly by Chinese international students, we were easily marginalised by these established organisations due to our immigrant status and ethnic minority background. As Zhao (2020) points out, the majority of social movements do not cherish or recognise the knowledge of the diaspora, nor do they show genuine support for them. Our experience of being marginalised in the antiracism movement problematises the hierarchical organisation of social movements in the United Kingdom.

## Chinese4BlackLives

At the beginning of our anti-Sinophobia activism in February, we received some criticism on our social media account, such as: 'Chinese are racist. Why are you doing activism against racism in the UK? Go back to your country!' These attacks leveraged racial inequalities in China to delegitimise our antiracism campaign. Although we were hurt by the racist context in which we were operating, we realised that we were also ignorant regarding racial relations in China and had limited understandings of black communities' experiences. Two months later, some black immigrants in Guangzhou were forced to leave their accommodation by the local police and some landlords under rigid COVID-19-related security regulations and, without other alternatives being provided, ended up living under bridges (March et al. 2020). This revealed the difficult situation of black people in China. When the news was released on *CNN*, many in the Chinese diaspora started to mobilise and contacted activist friends of ours in Guangzhou to understand the situation of African people there. Our actions ranged from translating Chinese Government documents to ordering food for displaced African people in Guangzhou and advocating for the local government to protect their rights. The local government soon acknowledged the brutal ways in which African people were treated, and the Chinese Government then put much diplomatic effort into smoothing Sino-African relationships.

A month later, following the death of George Floyd, the BLM movement was revived first in the United States and then spread around the world. Based on our anti-Sinophobia activism, we felt an urgency to respond to this worldwide resurgence of BLM. Consequently, we initiated Chinese4blacklives. Due to the pandemic restrictions, most of our activities took place online, including workshops and discussions. In one of these activities, we asked our group members to draw pictures and posters to support the BLM movement. After we posted them on our social media, we were connected with another group of Chinese feminists, in North America, who were also organising campaigns for the BLM movement.

Beyond our social activism, we also came to realise that our group members needed to understand blackness from a more transnational and historical perspective—two aspects that were absent from our lived experiences and the education we had received. Due to our limited knowledge about anti-black racism, we decided to start with self-education in the Chinese student community. In our discussions, we talked about our confusion and the limitations in understanding black communities' lived experiences and their struggles in society; it was clear that taking action without learning and understanding first was very imprudent. Even worse, it might even end up reproducing the very inequalities we were aiming to challenge.

We held four workshops on transnational blackness—on political blackness in the United Kingdom, histories of black people in China, African people in Guangzhou, and Trevor Noah's politics on race in South Africa. We invited young Chinese scholars from the United States and United Kingdom, as well as activists in Guangzhou and England. Significantly, we had the chance to talk with Jasmine, an African-American woman who works as an English teacher in Guangzhou.

Nevertheless, despite the fact the boundaries and scope of our activism continued to expand, there were still limitations on our support for BLM. Even though we had started to involve ourselves in British political movements, we could not overcome our immigrant status and health concerns. For this reason, beyond the self-education activities exclusive to our own members online, we did not organise any group gatherings to join any public BLM protests in the United Kingdom. As news reports describing the police brutality against protesters in the United States multiplied, several members of our group went individually to public protests in London and other places in the United Kingdom, but few of us felt safe enough to mobilise our Chinese student community to go to these huge events as a collective. This had a direct impact on the level of transformative power in our anti-racism campaign. For this reason, we could not completely commit ourselves to building alliances with BLM in public gatherings. This limitation not only restricted our support network, but also

diminished the sustainability of our movement. As BLM and Sinophobia received less and less interest from the mainstream media, the momentum of our antiracism campaigns gradually reduced. However, we carry on our feminist organising at VaChina, but with a reflexive intersectional perspective on race, gender, and class.

## Embracing Tensions and Anomalies

To conclude, our experience as young Chinese feminist students involved in antiracism campaigns revealed the structural oppression we received as the outsider within in British society as a whole. Before the pandemic, with the awareness of being on the margins, few Chinese international students had the motivation to work to change their peripheral position. By organising antiracism activism during the pandemic, we were increasingly entangled with British society by directly addressing the issue of the racial inequalities we experienced as part of the Chinese diaspora. Furthermore, by participating in the BLM movement, we became involved in the political struggles of other racial minorities against racism in a global context. The outbreak of COVID-19 provided us with a political opportunity to mobilise, to imagine possibilities, and to make changes. As Collins (1986) notes, outsider-within status is bound to generate tensions. As outsiders within, once we have seen the existing structures of oppression, it is necessary for us to embrace the tensions and anomalies, and identify future meaningful action from here. ■

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