

Presentation 1

Constructing Pan-Asian Identities in France: Second Generation Asian Youth's Mobilization

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1. Introduction

My presentation today is taken from a chapter of my book drawing on the emergence of Asian Identities in France. The book's title is "A model minority? Chinese migrants and anti-Asian racism", and it's based on interviews with Chinese migrants under the current tide of racism against Asians in France, as we can see in Picture 1 from one of my informants, one of the young activists in France.

Picture 1. "I am not a virus"



Source: Author

The question about racism against Asians and the group identity of being Asians in France is rather new, both in the Media but also among the activists. I will discuss how these identities have been constructed and have evolved through different waves of mobilization over the last ten years, and how this consciousness about being Asian began with a small number of migrants of Chinese descent, but has grown to include youths whose parents came from different parts of Asia, and still continues to evolve and to change in France.

I would like to highlight two contexts to understand this phenomenon in France. The first is the ambivalent category of being Asians that has been observed all over the world since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since last year, in numerous countries in the West and worldwide, we have been observing Asian phobia, racism against Asians, or Asian hate. These sentiments against people perceived as Chinese, Asian or East Asian have been observed and discussed by the Media, but they do not show how such hostility has been ignored and complicated. It also raises the question of being Asian because COVID-19 was a phenomenon firstly discovered in mainland China. All the recent Media attention has raised some significant questions: ‘What does it mean to be Asian today’? Does Asia only refer to East Asians from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, or is it actually the whole of Asia in the geographic concept?

In the French context, there has been a fear about the emergence of China over the past 10 years. As a superpower, its hegemonic culture has been revealed in political circles, and since the COVID-19 pandemic has occurred, the fear behind the seeming admiration for China’s image has been projected on all the people in France who are perceived as being Chinese. This is the first context about such a phenomenon and its effect. The literature on global “Asian-phobia” catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Strabucchi and Chan 2021; Li and Nicholson 2021) points out the paradoxical consequences of China’s global rise.

The second field of literature that I want to discuss focuses on the identity formation of second-generation immigrants. How can immigrant

children use their culture as an element of their collective action? Regarding this, I will refer to the idea of Peggy Levitt, who talks about the transnational social field as a cultural repertoire for the second generation immigrant (Levitt 2002), as a new tool of cultural activism to help them to construct their identity. Another writer on this topic is the Canadian cultural sociologist, Michelle Lamont, who has been talking about the emergent desire of enticed imitation in anti-racism (Lamont and Flemming, 2005).

In this initiative it seems that the cultural element, cultural repertory, is much more important than the traditional form of militancy against racism, and there has been a transfer of focus from the question of redistribution to the question of recognition.

My research examines how the second-generation Asian youth in France constructs its cultural repertoire within the assimilationist paradigm of the French “Republican Model” and asks how their own Asian identity and experience of travelling in Asia affect their repertoire of action.

My case study focusses on second-generation Asian youth in France, with whom I have been conducting interviews from 2012 to the present. I have interviewed some of the people whom I mention in my presentation several times since 2012. In fact, we have become more or less friends and acquaintances through the evolution of the mobilization. Others I have contacted during the past two years since the movement against racism after COVID-19 began. Altogether there are more than thirty-two different youths of different origins whom I have quoted in this study, and most of their parents come from the East Asian countries like China, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, and I will explain why later. In addition, I conducted observation in the immigrant association’s meetings and demonstrations. Finally, there will also be an analysis of media coverage and social media posts to highlight a different phenomenon and stigma.

2. Asia-Phobia: a Blind Spot in the French Anti-Racist Movement

Although France has a long history of anti-racism the phenomenon of targeting Asians has been a blind spot which has been rarely discussed until recently. There are two reasons why this has occurred. The first is because of the republican model in France that has been a *doxa* in the execution of political policy. French policy has been guided by an assimilationist paradigm so there has been a long-term negation of the existence of any racial categories or racism.

The consequence has been that in practice among the administration, the teachers, and even the scholars, there has been a resistance to looking at the ethnic statistic, which means that unlike many countries, it is impossible to record our ethnic or racial belonging on an administrative form. In France, such statistic does not exist formally, although when you discuss with a social worker or with a teacher, people will not hesitate to mention the proportion of their students with immigrant origins. Officially, this is a phenomenon that has never been recognized by the state, but a resistance has been growing since 2010, since the rise of Islamophobia in France. Scholars and activists argue for the necessity to have ethnic statistics in order to prove and highlight the reality of racial discrimination, and several colleagues have conducted such survey in this regard.

So it is a huge debate, but at the same time it is taboo to imagine or consider France in the lens of multiculturalism. In such a context, it is already difficult to talk about ethnic minorities. So it is even more complicated for the Asian minorities, whose presence in France has been less important, to highlight their self-identity. This is the second reason why anti-Asian racism has been a phenomenon that is hardly known in the French context, because unlike minorities from North Africa or the African continent, who come from France's historical colonies, the demographic presence of the Asian minority in France is less important,

and mostly today they are especially concentrated in the in Paris and its suburbs.

The most significant immigration began before WWII with the influx of students and elites from France's former colonies in Southeast Asian and economic immigrants from mainland China. Then in 1979 an estimated 120,000 war refugees arrived from Vietnam. Then from 1980, there was an increasing number of economic immigrants from China and Sri Lanka, some of whom entered as refugees and acquired legal status immediately. Others, as economic immigrants often had to spend a long time as illegal migrants before acquiring legal status. This illegal status also contributed to a form of avoidance regarding the administration, the public space, which further explains why they tend to be rather discreet in regard to the society and to the public administration.

Although there is a lack of accurate statistics, because of the obvious difficulties in collecting ethnic statistics, there have been various population studies, or studies done by local administrations, which all show that actually Asian migrants, especially Chinese and Southeast Asian migrants, are increasing rapidly in the Paris region in terms of demographics, and are also increasingly visible in terms of commerce. In some neighborhoods we also see a growing numbers of communities coming from South Asia and India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. However, until now we do not have exact statistics on how many immigrants or descendants from these countries are living in France. So since they do not have the statistics and also because of their reluctance to talk about race and racism until very recently, the phenomenon of the rise of racism against Asians has hardly been discussed in France.

However, for years there have been different movements and mobilizations, and one of the activists has pointed out that while growing up in France, Asians have been experiencing various forms of being otherized. To illustrate this narrative a high school student of Chinese origin told me that her classmates would often say that she was good at math because they think all Chinese are good at math, and she would always protest, 'but I was born here [in France]!'. Like this example, the

form of racism experienced by Asian youth, usually seems to be less violent compared to that experienced by the minority youth of African descent. This also explains why this form of soft racism is often taken less seriously. Another example is a sketch that was broadcast on TV in 2016. Two of the most distinguished comedians in France made fun of Asian people by putting on yellow face and imitating the way that they imagined Asian or Chinese talk when they talk in French. Many people thought this was very funny, but actually, it was just a way to depreciate Asian people. This kind of behavior sparked a debate about where the limit of humor is: “Can we really laugh at this kind of racialized form of humor?”

Thus we can say that there have been different forms of racism or racialization targeting the Asian people, but since it has been more soft or indirect it is taken less seriously by the organizations of anti-racist movements, and also by the Asian minority themselves.

3. Security is a Right: Articulating Difference and Inclusion

The situation has gradually evolved, because since 2010, there have been different forms of mobilization in France, especially in the Paris region, launched by the Asian Youth who went onto the streets to demonstrate and to claim the existence of criminal attacks and aggression, targeting the Asian people. This was a catalyst for huge street demonstrations and frequent and violent physical attacks against Asians, and this has been recognized by many residents, especially the people living in precarious situations, and as Asians, we might have more chance of being the target of an attack in some particular neighborhoods in Paris.

Through these different demonstrations various slogans have also been evolved (Table 1). The first demonstration in 2010, in the Belleville neighborhood, an ethnic center, was initiated to ask for more police

protection. Since 2011, the slogan was changed to ‘security is a right’ and the demonstrators also demanded, ‘Liberty, Equality and Security’. So we see that in this slogan the second generation youths are they trying to articulate the French slogan, the first doxa of the Republican model of Liberty, Equality, and Solidarity, to articulate their demand for security.

Table 1. An Evolution of Slogans

Year	Slogans	Protagonists
2010 Street Demonstration at the Belleville neighborhood	« Against the violence » « Security for all »	6 associations of first – generation Chinese entrepreneurs
2011 Demonstration in Paris city center (République-Nation)	« Security is a right » « Liberty, equality, and security»	A network mixed with local entrepreneurs in Belleville and second-generation Chinese
2016 Demonstration in Aubervilliers and Paris	« Prejudice kills !» « Security for All »	63 associations of mainland Chinese, diasporas and South-East Asians
2017 Protests against police violence causing death of a Chinese man	« Police = murderers »	Young Chinese adults and teenagers
2017 Launching the local committee « Security for all »	« Security for all »	30-40 Asian adults

Source: Author

These demonstrations have evolved and, in 2016, a new slogan ‘Prejudice kills’ appeared because one Chinese man actually died from a racial attack after spending several days in a coma in the hospital. Since the growth of aggression, attacking the Asians has been becoming a public problem. Young Asians actually used the slogan ‘Prejudice kills’ to highlight that any kinds of racial stereotype can become a motivation for a violent attack, and it might have serious consequences. They demanded security for everyone, that all people despite different ethnic belonging and the color of their skin should be able to be protected.

Then in 2017, we saw two different initiatives. First there were riots after a Chinese man was shot by police in his apartment, and in the same year those youngsters who had been active in the mobilization decided to launch a committee called ‘Security for all’ which was organized in different suburbs and neighborhoods around Paris. The idea was to better organize the victims to be able to file their claims when if they were attacked. They will accompany the victim to the police station to file their claim because since many people don’t speak French well enough, they do not know how to file a claim. They also offer legal assistance for people who need it.

If you look at this evolution, one thing that’s important to note is that although they began in 2010 with the initiative of some associations of first generation Chinese merchants, through the years, these initiatives have been extended to all the people of Asian origin. Now not only Chinese, but also other communities coming from Southeast Asian countries, as well as an increasing number of youths of the second generation are participating in such a demonstrations. Another important point is that these demonstrations on the street arouse the attention Media, and that over time the target has changed from a quest for security to equal rights.

We can also look at this from another direction and highlight the roots of aggression. So, behind the street demonstration that I mentioned, there are also other initiatives made by the second generation youth, and the most important actor here is the Association of Young Chinese in France (AJCF) which was created in 2009. In 2011, they participated in the second demonstration in Bellville, which focused on the reason for such criminal attacks. They chose to create a new slogan ‘Security is a Right’, and then to articulate the question about aggression and criminal attacks to the question about being equal an equal citizen in France. This is a very intelligent way to talk about their rights because they diplomatically avoided the question of race or racism in a political context as it would have been perceived as very hostile to evoke such a question. Instead they used France’s own Republican rhetoric to say that

the right of not being attacked, the right of not being the victim of criminal attacks should be equal for every citizen despite their origin.

In fact, they were very successful because they could legitimize their mobilization and convince the public sector, with the police and City Hall as their partners. In 2012 they succeeded in suing a French weekly magazine that had published an article accusing Chinese entrepreneurs of being illegal merchants who behaved like criminals, a case which they won in 2014.

Picture 2. Some Racialized Characterizations



Source: Author

This was the first court case of its kind and in Picture 2 we can see the kinds of racist comments that these young Asians were subjected to in public spaces every day. For example, people will say that you are yellow face, and other racist insults, or that you are Jackie Chan, which

is a racialized image that Jackie Chan represents all Asian people, and ‘spring roll’, which is people say a lot in the public space on the street.

They found a way to articulate the everyday racist remarks in a media report that accused the whole community, and this was also a way to show the people how much they underestimated these racist remarks that Asians have to experience every day. Actually, they raise the question of whether expressing these remarks was a crime. So we should consider 2012 as another milestone in their mobilization to highlight the existence of racism in the everyday context in these cultural manifestations.

Finally in 2016 when the mugging and murder of a Chinese man happened in Aubervilliers in the suburbs of Paris, the youngsters decided to use their slogan ‘Prejudice kills’ to show that although this racial prejudice experienced by the Asians was considered funny or not serious, the fact was that as long as this prejudice existed, it could become the motivation for violence. What is interesting is that through all this mobilization, the young generation were becoming more and more questioning of the Republican model. Rather than showing their level of assimilation, they were tending to highlight their multiple belongingness.

1) Double Disqualification: when the personal experiences collide with French universalist narratives

As the following two narratives to show, there is a kind of double disqualification when one’s personal experiences collide with French universalist narratives:

“At 18 years old, I chose to become French, which is a really *Republican* initiative. However, later **when I entered the university, I realized that I am not so French.** On the street, people do not hesitate to assign me as ‘Chinese’. There as a mixture of frustration that pushed me to ask, ‘Who are you indeed? Are you Chinese or French?’ Later on, I realized that **I am neither Chinese nor French. I am simply a Chinese of France (Chinois de France), and there are many children like me.**”

(R.W., born in 1987 in China and arriving in Paris at the age of 7.)

“The question of identity comes often from others. I never asked myself this question before, but from the moment when the others me labeled as Chinese, I understood that even though I was born here and go to the same university as them, people still consider me as Chinese and not French. However, when I visit China with my family, I don’t really feel like it’s a return to my origins either. **In China, people do not consider me as really Chinese; whereas in France, people do not consider me as really French.**”

(M. Z., born in 1988 in France. Law student.)

These youngsters participated in the mobilization, so through their personal experience, they tend to question the validity, or the meaning of the French Republican model, because they realize that as Chinese, or with Chinese descent, they are never in fact considered as fully French. There is also a mechanism of labeling them as different because of their origin, their appearance, or the way they were brought up in an ethnic entrepreneur’s family. By questioning such a Republican model, they also tend to assume a kind of double-belonging as the second narrative says. So finally, after some experience traveling in China, they realize that there are neither really Chinese nor really French, but that they have to create for themselves a third category as both Chinese and French.

2) Cosmopolitan China as a source of pride

“Since my childhood, I have been to China every year to see my family, but I didn’t find it especially interesting. In 2008, after professional high school, I did an internship in China for 3 months, and I was extremely fascinated. This has totally changed me. It made me always desire going abroad so as to discover new things. Later, I went to Qinghua University (a prestigious university in Beijing) for a one month

exchange. When I was there, I met many people. **I love meeting new people and speaking foreign languages. I love going to KTV (karaoke) and buying street food next to university. Many, many things** I also traveled a lot. **I've met many Chinese people like me,** who are from Sweden, from Netherlands, from Bolivia, and from Africa.... **and we all have a common spirit as Chinese. I mean, although we were born in different countries. We can feel that we are similar."**
(A.L., Born in 1988 in Paris.)

"In fact, I felt good in China. Everyone was friendly, especially those who work in the cinema. **The fact that I am both Chinese and French is very easy."**

(C.L., born in 1984 in China and arriving at Paris at the age of 5.
Employee of a cinema production company.)

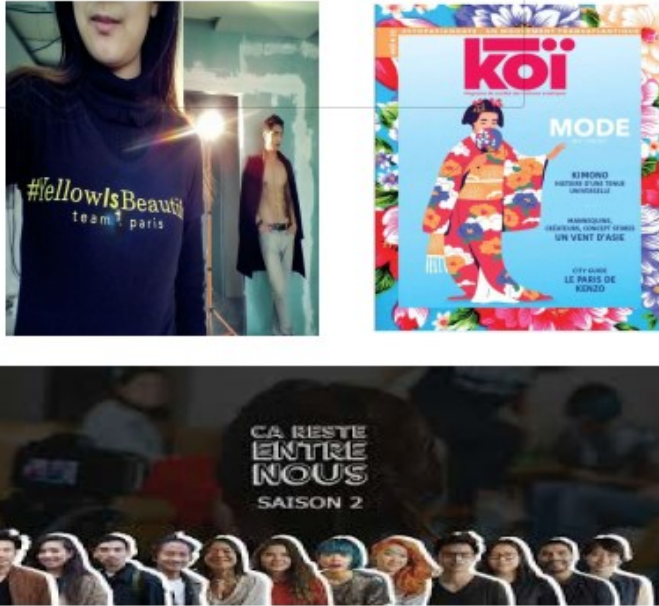
Finally, this feeling of having double identity, of being both Chinese and French, has become the raw material of their cultural activism. So here another activist says; "Finally, although in France we feel that we are probably perceived as inferior and different from others, the experience of traveling to China or to Asia, finally becomes a plus by giving us a kind of pride to have double-belonging and double heritage". By traveling to China and Asia and meeting other Asian youth who also shared this rich version of being multicultural, they tend to be able to gradually assume their status about having a double identity. They also tend to have a more positive attitude regarding their background, considering it has given them some rich courage to confront everyday situations and everyday aggression.

3) Criticizing everyday racism and norms of beauty based on euro-centric criteria

The identity of having a double belonging finally contributed to a form of cultural activism that pushed them to challenge the stigmatism,

to criticize the clichés and stereotypes, and to assume the fact that being Asian or Chinese can still be rich and beautiful. I'll mention here three different initiatives that have emerged since 2016. The first is a Facebook page created by the Asian minorities in France called 'Yellow is Beautiful' (Picture 3). They have been making an exposition and photo exposition by showing portraits of different Asian youth, and the slogan 'Yellow is Beautiful', which is clearly based on the slogan, 'Black is Beautiful'.

Picture 3. "Yellow is Beautiful"



Source: Author

So we see that there is a tendency to be proud of being Asian, and even a tendency to play with the description and reverse the stigma. 'Yellow' used to be a very stigmatizing term, but here they try to say that being Asian can be positive. The magazine 'Koi' shown in the illustration above, is also the first magazine created to introduce Asian

culture to the community, to all the readers in France who can be interested in this term. So they use the word *Koi*, the name of a beautiful ornamental fish in Japan, to symbolize the spirit of being Asian.

Finally, there is also an internet site, '*Ca reste entre nous*', meaning, "This is just between you and me" where they bring young Asians together to talk about their experiences about sexuality, looking for a job, discrimination, SQ and so on. So the idea is just to talk openly about the experience of being a minority as Asians in France. This mini-sitcom is very popular on YouTube. Furthermore, it's popularity is not only limited to Asian audiences, and other minorities like North African or African descendants also love this and then remark that it is actually rare in France to be able to talk about the experiences of being a minority.

4. Coronavirus and Asian-Phobia: Denouncing Systemic Racism

Next, I would like to talk about the new the new development since 2019. As we have seen so far, the French Asian youth were able to construct a rhetoric that could confront racism. However, when the COVID-19 corona virus outbreak occurred in France it actually infected all the people who were perceived as Chinese and Asian, so such an situation caused this consciousness that already existed among the Chinese youth to spread to other Asian Youth who had not been exposed to the Chinese environment, who didn't necessarily have a Chinese identity, but who had been searching for an identity as being Asian in France.

The first important mobilization happened in January 2021 in France, when we started seeing anti-Asian attacks happening in the public space. One Asian woman who has Korean origin but who was adopted by French couple made a post on Twitter highlighting the ignorance of anti-Asian racism and its banality. In her post she claimed that people tend to confuse being Chinese and Asian, confronting all the

Asian people as being Chinese. Secondly, here in France, people are already panicking about the spread of COVID-19, while it's still happening in China, although it's so far away. Then she denounced the violent attacks against all Asians, Asian shops and restaurants, perceived as being Chinese and thus perceived as being responsible for the spread of Covid in France, as pathetic behavior.

Picture 4: "I am not a virus"



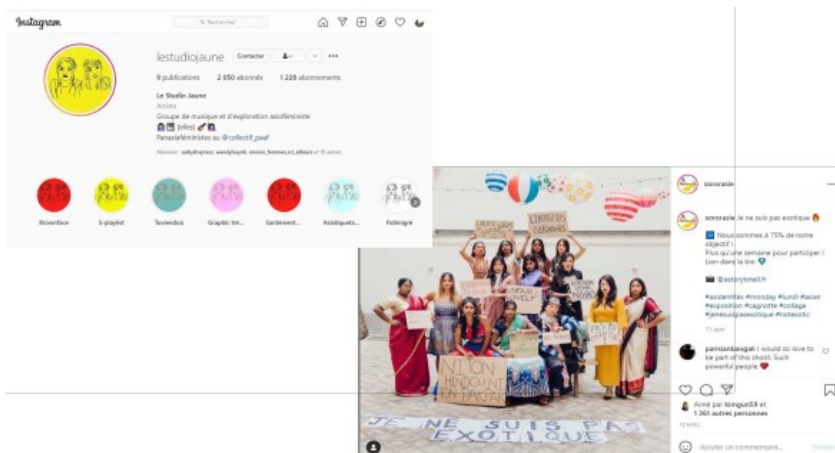
Source: Author

She posted a photo of herself (Picture 4) with a poster saying, "*Je ne suis pas un virus*" or "I am not a virus" and asked everyone to do the same. This initiative was very successful because she got more than 30,000 photos in two days. But what's interesting here is that she is the first one who talked about being labeled as Asian, which means that by doing so she also questioned the power relationships within the Asian minorities. We think of the category of an Asian minority, so what does it really mean to be considered Asian? What is the impact of China's global image to the growth of Empire and anti-Asian racism? She has raised a lot of questions that at the same time helped to bring together the categories of agency. By talking about this she raised the power relationship among people from different Asian countries and called for

a kind of joint action between those of Chinese origin who were already active in the anti-racist movement and other people who widely consider themselves as Asians.

So COVID-19 actually pushed the movement in France in a new direction, and also gave rise to more debate. That was in January, and then in April, in France we began a three-month lockdown and a growing number of people stayed at home and the Internet became the only public space where we could share our experiences. It was also during this time that all these young Asians who were participating in the mobilization before started to share their experiences about being otherized, about being attacked, about their panic, their fear, their identity problems and their troubles. Some of them were already activists who had experience in the traditional activism scene, especially in the radical left party or LGBTQIA movement. Others were just youngsters who were very concerned with the discourse about anti-racism. Whatever their previous experiences, the internet became a platform that allowed them to exchange their ideas, to share their theoretical resources and reflections, and to create a discourse on a larger identity about being Asian in a politicized way which is radically critical of all the prejudices and colonization heritage.

Picture 5. The Yellow Studio



Picture 5 shows an Instagram account set called “*Lestudiojaune*”, or ‘The Yellow Studio’. Basically, it’s two young girls who like singing and creating music, with Asian origin, and they try to share the music but also their reflection about being Asian and creative. On the right is another account that is trying to bring together all the young women from different Asian countries, and they are showing some slogans that are really politicized because they don’t just talk about the situation about being Asian here. They also highlight the political situation in China. The main slogan in front of them says, “I don’t want to be exotic”. So this is also a way to show the rich individuality among the Asian nations, but attacks the opinion of the majority society that always tries to rank them as being Asian, where everyone looks similar so everyone is the same, whereas actually, the contemporary Asian diaspora is extremely rich in cultural diversity and heterogeneous identities among those people. I should also mention that many of them are associated with the LGBT struggle, which means they are already open to the intersectional approach, and they tend to be more active in the convergence of mobilization with other sectors such as the black and north African minorities.

This year (2021) since there was a shooting in Atlanta in March, in Asian youth in France also joined the movement about ‘Stop Asian Hate’. In the end of March, one week after the Atlanta shooting, there was also a trial related to several internet platforms who were encouraging racial attacks against Chinese people. When the trial began, the Association of Young Chinese in France posted an online video on YouTube, with the slogan, ‘We belong here!’

So finally, after more than seven years of mobilization against racism, this year the discourse has been transformed to focus on the question about belonging, about the fact of being Asian and being French simultaneously, and trying to resist the tendency to articulate Asian with the image of an aggressive China that can be a source of fear for the French society.

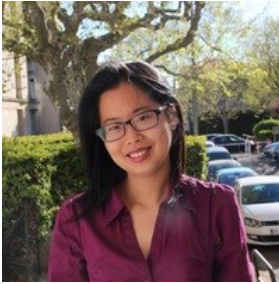
To conclude, if we look at what's happening in France, it is clear that the Asian minority, when we compare it with North African minority, has followed a very different path both in building their identity and in their struggle for recognition. Although the French Republican model has contributed to a long-time ignorance or negation of racism, the cosmopolitan experiences of young second generation Asians and the image of a globalized China have become the raw material of their collective identity and even anti-discrimination actions (in the French case). So the way that they construct their discourse is transgressive to the rhetoric of the French Republican model, in that they construct such a model by attacking the form of the doxa of assimilation, and trying to assume the potential of the multicultural society that French society really is.

Ideally, I think that the next step might be the construction of a global Asian identity, despite all the internal debate and despite heterogeneous identities within such a category.

Picture 6. Love our people like you love our food



Presenters



Ya-Han Chuang

Presentation 1. Constructing Pan-Asian Identities in France: Second Generation Asian Youth's Mobilization

Dr. Ya-han Chuang is a Postdoc researcher at the French Institute for demographic studies. She has published a book entitled “The Emergence of Asian Identities in France”. Her articles include: “Asiaphobie: a Blind Spot of the Anti-Racist Movement in France”, “‘Security is a Right’: Legitimizing the Communitarian Mobilisation under the French Republican Model”, “Coronavirus and ‘Stop Asian Hate’: Assuming Double Belongingness”. She also published a book “A Model Minority? Chinese in France and Anti-Asian Racism” (*Une minorité modèle? Chinois de France et racisme anti-Asiatiques*. Editions La Découverte, 2021)