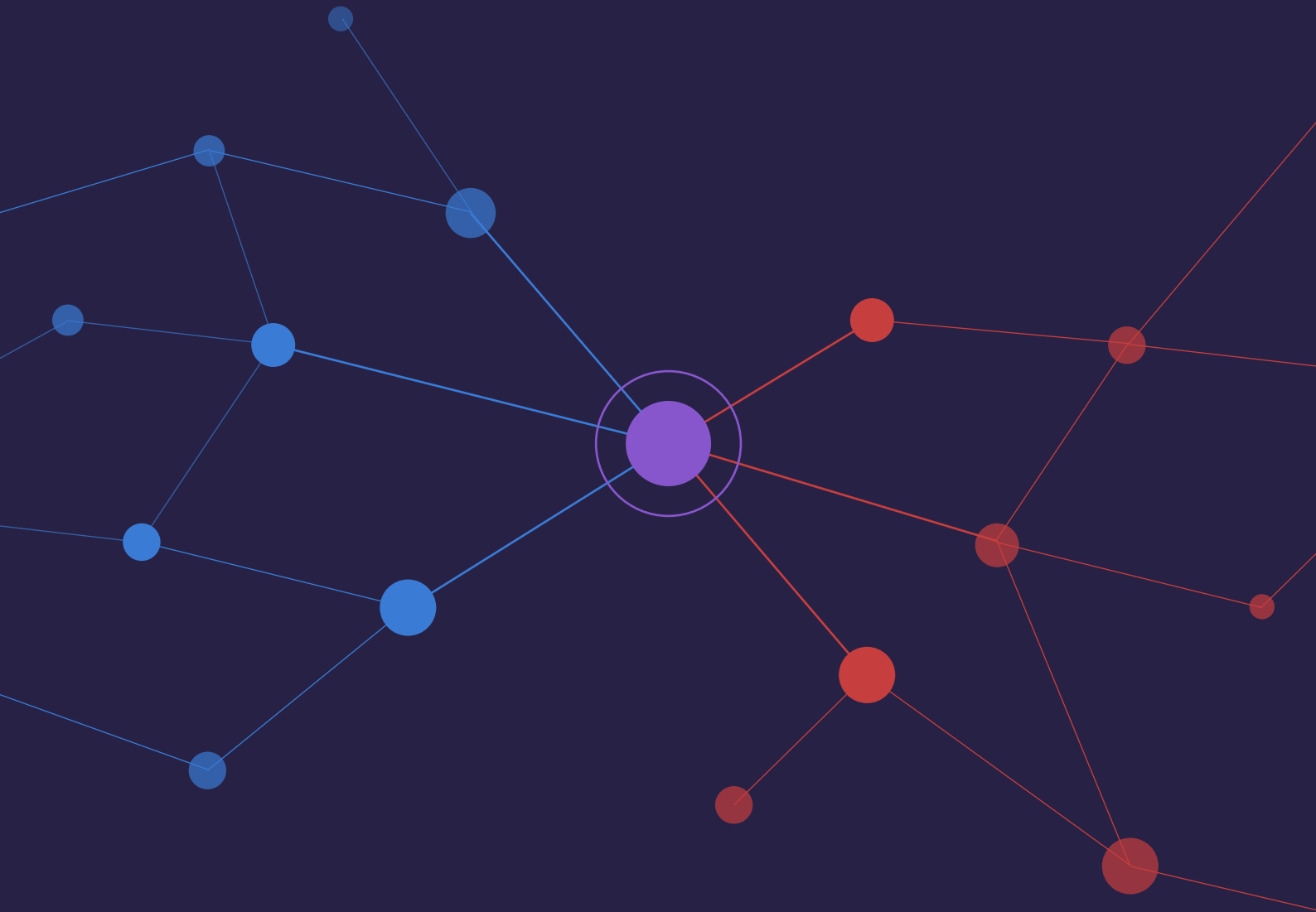


BOOK

Homeland in your pocket: Chinese diaspora communities in Europe and their experience of information suppression

Chu Yang



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RESONANT

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HOMELAND IN YOUR POCKET: CHINESE DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF INFORMATION SUPPRESSION

Book

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This book is a public-facing outcome of the research conducted within the Horizon Europe-funded RESONANT project (No. 101132439). RESONANT focuses on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), including information suppression, and seeks to understand how state and non-state actors seek to control, distort, or limit access to information, what tactics they employ, and how these practices affect different target groups. Bringing together an interdisciplinary consortium of researchers and practitioners, the project aims to generate evidence, methodological tools, and policy-relevant recommendations to help reduce societal vulnerabilities to such activities. This publication is based on more than 20 interviews with members of the Chinese diaspora in Europe, conducted within the framework of the project. The researchers would like to express their gratitude to all interviewees for sharing their honest reflections. For security reasons, all interviewees cited in this book remain anonymous.

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Introduction: the evolution of Chinese diaspora in Europe

On a gray November morning in 1923, a Chinese sailor named Chen sat in a cramped boarding house near the Liverpool docks, pen in his hand. He had been trying to write a letter home to his village in Guangdong for three days now, but the words would not come. What could he tell them? That the fog here never really lifted? That the food made him sick? That he missed the sound of Cantonese so much that sometimes he stood outside the Chinese grocery store just to hear other people talk?

He knew this letter would take months to reach his mother. By the time she received it, winter would have passed. By the time her reply came back, if it ever did, he might have shipped out again to some other cold, distant port. The paper in front of him represented his only thread home, and it had to carry everything: reassurance that he was well, news that he was saving money, affection he could not voice in person, questions he would never hear answered in real time. Chen carefully folded the letter, addressed it in his best characters, and walked to the post office.

He would not hear from home for half a year.

* * *

Distance, in that era, was absolute. It was not just measured in miles but in months, in the weight of silence between letters, in the slow erosion of memory. Chinese immigrants to Europe in the early 20th century knew they were leaving, truly leaving, when they boarded those ships. Home became a place that existed primarily in memory, fading a little more with each passing season.

The first significant Chinese presence in Europe emerged in the mid-19th century, when sailors and traders established small communities in port cities like Liverpool and London. These early Chinatowns were not the tourist destinations they would later become—they were survival mechanisms, small islands of linguistic and cultural familiarity in an overwhelmingly foreign world. A place where you could eat familiar food, speak your native dialect, maintain some connection to a home that was impossibly far away.

But “connection” is perhaps too strong a word. These early immigrants could not call home or see their families’ faces. Many would never return to China—the journey was too expensive, difficult, and final. They built lives in Europe knowing that the price of economic opportunity was permanent dislocation.

Writing in 1922, the sociologist Robert E. Park studied these immigrant communities and their newspapers, the “immigrant press” of his era. He made a prediction that seemed reasonable at the time: that foreign-language newspapers would facilitate assimilation. They would, he argued, serve as a bridge, helping immigrants gradually adapt to their new homes while maintaining temporary cultural connections. But

distance would inevitably win. The second generation would speak English or French or Dutch. The third generation would barely remember Chinese. The immigrant press was a transitional phenomenon, helping smooth an inevitable process of assimilation.

Park's logic was sound for his era and the pattern continued through much of the 20th century. When home is truly far away, you cannot hear your mother's voice for years at a time, and return visits are impossible, then yes, assimilation becomes the path of least resistance. Memory fades. New generations adopt new identities. The homeland becomes ancestral history rather than lived reality.

* * *

But something fundamental was about to change. Something that would reverse Park's prediction entirely and transform what distance meant.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Europe began seeing new types of Chinese immigrants. They were students –thousands of them –coming to study at European universities; professionals, transferred to European branches of international companies; artists and intellectuals, some seeking creative freedom, others simply following career opportunities in an increasingly globalized world.

Take, for example, a young woman from Beijing who arrives in Berlin in 2005 to pursue a master's degree in architecture. She is 24, the daughter of academics. Unlike the restaurant entrepreneurs of the 1970s, she has traveled internationally before and speaks English fluently. She is part of China's first generation to grow up with the Internet, with mobile phones, with a sense of the world as accessible and interconnected.

For someone like her, leaving China does not feel like permanent exile. It feels more like extending one's range. Return is always possible and connections can be maintained. In 2005, email exists and QQ messenger allows daily chats with friends back in Beijing.

But even for the generation of the early 2000s, distance still exists. Email is not the same as being there. Online chats cannot replace attending weddings, births, experiencing the texture of daily life. China's rapid transformation can only be witnessed through others' eyes, through stories and photos, not through lived experience.

Then comes 2011.

In January that year, Tencent launches a new app called Weixin – known internationally as WeChat. Within months, it transforms how Chinese people communicate. By the time it added voice messages in 2012 and video calls in 2013, it has become something unprecedented: a platform that does not just connect you to home, but makes home feel constantly present.

Suddenly, that architecture student in Berlin can have running conversations with her mother throughout the day. Not formal phone calls or carefully composed emails, but casual check-ins, photos of lunch, voice messages while walking to work, video calls where her mother can show her new furniture in the living room, where she can “attend” family dinners from her Berlin apartment.

The nature of distance simply evaporates. She is no longer missing out on daily life in China. The homeland has not receded into memory –it remains vividly, insistently present.

And she is not alone. By the mid-2010s, millions of Chinese people abroad are experiencing the same dissolution of distance. WeChat, Weibo, and other Chinese platforms create what researchers would come to call “constant presence,” the homeland is no longer far away. It is in your pocket, updating in real-time, demanding attention, offering connection, refusing to fade into memory.

Park’s prediction was based on one fundamental assumption: that distance would increase over time, that the homeland would gradually recede into the past, that memory would fade and assimilation would follow.

Instead, distance collapsed. The homeland did not recede. It remained vividly, insistently present. And the implications of this transformation would prove far more complex than anyone anticipated.

* * *

It is precisely this transformation that the present book seeks to understand. Not just the technological change, but the fundamental restructuring of what it means to be part of a diaspora, to maintain identity across distance, to integrate into a new society while remaining connected to an old one.

And here is what makes this even more complex: the constant presence comes with strings attached. Those same platforms that collapse distance, keep Chinese migrants connected to Beijing’s daily life, make diaspora feel less like permanent exile and more like temporary displacement, those platforms also bring something else. Surveillance. Control. The long arm of the Chinese state, reaching across those very same 7,800 kilometers.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. First, we need to understand who these new Chinese communities in Europe actually are. Because unlike the relatively homogeneous waves of immigration in earlier eras, the Chinese diaspora in Europe today is fractured, diverse, and internally divided in ways that make any simple narrative impossible.

* * *

Walk through Amsterdam’s Chinatown today and you will encounter multiple Chinese communities, often barely interacting with each other. Starting with the generation of restaurant owners and small business operators from the 1970s and 1980s, through their children and grandchildren –the second and third generation – born in Europe or brought here young, all the way to the newest wave: students, professionals, political exiles and dissidents, artists and intellectuals.

These groups often operate in parallel rather than in dialogue. Their relationships with “home” differ radically. They do not share experiences. They do not share the language: recent arrivals speak Mandarin, many older residents speak Cantonese or Fujianese. They do not even share the same China, really. The China that people left in the 1970s and 1980s is not the China that students left in 2005 or 2015.

And increasingly, there are new divisions even within these categories. A wariness has emerged, a sense of internal distrust and fragmentation. You never know who might be reporting back, who has connections to the embassy, who is here to

monitor. This concern, discussed more fully in later chapters, has made building community much harder.

This wariness, this sense of fracture within fracture, comes up repeatedly in conversations with Chinese people across Europe. The Chinese diaspora here is not a community. It is a collection of communities, often unaware of each other's existence, sometimes actively avoiding each other.

This book tells a story about navigating this strange new reality. But first, we need to meet the navigators, and understand where they came from, why they came, and what they found when they arrived in Europe at this particular moment in history. Because Chinese diaspora that exists today, only makes sense against the backdrop of all those who came before.

The digital bridge

Imagine the daily rhythm for a Chinese professional living in Copenhagen in 2015. She wakes up, and before getting out of bed, she checks WeChat. Overnight, while she slept, China lived an entire day. Her phone shows dozens of notifications.

Her mother posted photos in the family group chat: the morning breakfast, the new curtains she had bought, a funny video of the neighbor's cat. Her father forwarded three news articles about the economy. Her brother shared a video of his daughter's piano recital. 27 messages in the family chat, a continuous stream of life happening thousands of kilometers away.

She scrolls through her Moments feed, WeChat's equivalent of Facebook's timeline. Friends in Beijing are posting about a new restaurant opening. Someone is complaining about traffic. A former colleague shares photos from a work trip to Shenzhen. Another friend posts cryptic, melancholic text about "this city" that everyone understands is a veiled comment about recent policy changes, carefully worded to avoid censorship.

She has twelve active WeChat groups. Throughout the day, they ping constantly. While eating breakfast in Copenhagen, she is participating in conversations happening in real-time across separate continents. While walking to work, she voice-messages her mother, who responds immediately: she is eating dinner now, seven hours ahead. The separation between here and there becomes porous, penetrable, almost irrelevant. This is what "constant presence" means.

* * *

But WeChat and other Chinese platforms serve more functions than just maintaining family ties and cultural connections. This is what makes them so deeply embedded in diaspora life, simultaneously making them difficult to simply abandon for security reasons.

For many Chinese people in Europe, these platforms are essential tools for navigating the European life itself.

This is the first paradox of the digital age: the very platforms that keep you connected to China also help you integrate into Europe. When visa policies change, housing regulations shift, new residence permit procedures are announced, this information appears first, and often most clearly, in Chinese-language channels. European government websites might be difficult to navigate, especially for those still learning the local language, and official announcements might be buried in bureaucratic prose. But within hours, someone in the Chinese community has digested the information, translated the implications, and shared practical advice in a WeChat group or a public account.

Apart from that, Chinese cultural spaces advertise their events primarily through these platforms. A new independent bookstore in The Hague announces its opening

on WeChat. A film screening in Berlin gets shared through multiple group chats. Someone looking for a Chinese-speaking doctor, or a reliable translation service, or advice on dealing with a difficult landlord –all this information can be found through Chinese digital networks.

This creates an entire ecosystem of local life mediated through Chinese platforms. You can live in Amsterdam and access Amsterdam-specific practical information, connect with local Chinese cultural events, find local services, all without ever leaving the Chinese digital sphere. And yet, there lies the second paradox. These same platforms that facilitate local integration are also tools of surveillance and control.

* * *

So, we have three functions operating simultaneously and inseparably: connection, integration, and control.

You cannot have one without the others. The app that lets you video call your mother also monitors your conversations. The group chat that tells you about housing policy changes also operates under Chinese censorship rules. The platform that connects you to local Chinese cultural events also tracks your activities for the state.

This is what makes the digital transformation so much more complex than Park could have anticipated in 1922. His prediction was based on the assumption that you had to choose: maintaining homeland connections and delaying assimilation, or embracing the host country and letting homeland ties weaken. The digital age presents a third possibility: maintaining both simultaneously, living in two worlds at once, integrated and connected all at the same time.

But this state of constant presence comes with profound challenges. The optimistic reading, that technology liberates us from the tyranny of distance, crashes into a darker reality. Connection brings exposure and participation requires submission to surveillance. The price of never being cut off is never being free.

Chinese platforms themselves are carefully designed to be indispensable.

WeChat is not just about messaging. It is also used for payments and work communication. It includes mini-programs for everything from ordering food to booking appointments. It serves as your identity verification for countless services. It becomes a social medium through Moments. It can even be used for gaming, news, and increasingly, AI assistants and tools.

This network effect creates a powerful lock-in. Your family and friends are on WeChat. The local Chinese restaurant only takes orders through WeChat. The housing group, the university chat, the practical information you need, it is all on WeChat. Someone who refuses to use it does not only lose connection to China –they lose connection to local Chinese resources and communities in Europe.

And this is intended by design. The Chinese government does not only monitor these platforms. It actively encourages their use, knowing that dependency creates control. If you need the platform to stay connected to family, access practical information, and participate in your community –then you are much less likely to do anything that might get you banned from it.

It also means Chinese state security knows when you attended a protest. It means your cousin's job application might be affected by your social media posts and every

photo you share, comment you make, group you join is potentially monitored, analyzed, stored, and might someday be used against you or your family.

And this is where the story gets dark.

The long arm of the state

A journalist in the Netherlands received the first call on her Dutch phone number in 2023.

She was careful. She had left China years before and has built a new life in Europe. Yes, she has been working for an independent Chinese-language media, but she has not been doing anything illegal. She was in Europe, had a Dutch residence permit, and thought distance from China provided protection.

The voice on the other end was polite –friendly even –and was just checking in. How is she doing? What is she working on these days? When is she planning to come back for a visit? Just a friendly call from the homeland.

But she knew what it meant.

“Even with my Dutch number, I get messages and calls from Chinese authorities,” she explains. “I am not completely sure about the intentions, but, of course, it injects a degree of fear into our community. The message is: no matter where you are, we are watching and we can get in touch with you.”

Geographical distance therefore means nothing, and European borders do not provide sanctuary. The Chinese state’s reach extends far beyond China’s territory, operating through digital infrastructure, family connections, and a sophisticated system of transnational surveillance that does not make leaving China a guarantee of freedom.

This is the dark side of constant presence. Same platforms that collapse distance and keep people connected to their homeland also extend authoritarian control across continents. The two functions are inseparable.

* * *

The surveillance infrastructure operates on multiple levels simultaneously: from sophisticated technical systems to crude but effective social pressure.

At the technical level, Chinese platforms are designed to monitor. WeChat’s real-name registration requirement means that every account is tied to a Chinese ID card or phone number. Every message, group chat, or payment flows through servers subject to Chinese government access. Content moderation happens in real-time, through keyword filtering algorithms and human reviewers. Sensitive topics trigger automatic censorship –posts disappear, accounts get suspended, sometimes without explanation.

The censorship is not always obvious. Sometimes your post simply does not appear in others’ feeds. Another time it is visible to friends but not searchable. The uncertainty itself is part of the control mechanism –you never know what triggers the deletion or what keywords to avoid.

One interviewee notes: “WeChat is being checked at all times. I read about people chatting about sensitive topics, whose messages were deleted or they got visited by people from the government.”

This is not paranoia, but a documented reality. The Chinese government does not hide that it monitors these platforms. It is an official policy, codified in law, and openly acknowledged. What varies is the enforcement –who gets targeted, when, and how severely.

The technical surveillance is only the beginning. The real “genius” of transnational authoritarian control lies in leveraging social ties –particularly family connections –to extend its reach beyond what digital monitoring alone can achieve.

A researcher based in Europe describes her strategic thinking: “As a researcher, I try not to use my name in the reports.” Why? Because even though she lives in Europe, her family is in China. And the Chinese state knows this. The mechanism is simple and brutally effective: “The police or security agents come to your family and say ‘your child is involved in some illegal or anti-China activity in a third country. Talk to them.’ And the family puts pressure.”

It really is that simple. What parent wants police showing up at their doorstep? What elderly mother or father can withstand pressure from security officials asking questions about their child abroad? The shame of it in the Chinese context, the fear, and the social stigma –it is all overwhelming.

The pressure from the state does not rely on explicit violence. Often, it is much subtler. A concerned inquiry: “Your child posted something worrying online. We are just checking if everything is okay.” A helpful suggestion: “Maybe you should talk to them, make sure they are not getting involved with the wrong people.” A veiled warning: “We would hate for this to affect their ability to return home for visits.”

But sometimes, it is more direct. One activist, whose case cannot be detailed without risking identification, described family members in China being questioned, threatened, and facing consequences at work –all because of social media posts made from Europe.

The psychological impact of living under this kind of surveillance cannot be overstated.

* * *

The surveillance creates a pervasive culture of self-censorship that extends far beyond those who are directly targeted.

It also creates an internal conflict –between wanting to speak freely and needing to protect family, or between claiming your voice and avoiding consequences. The psychological tension is omnipresent: every post, comment, and share is calculated, weighed, and becomes a risk assessment exercise.

The self-censorship becomes habitual, automatic, and internalized. You stop considering particular topics, automatically avoid certain phrases, and develop an internal filter that screens everything before it is expressed.

This is the “brilliance” of the system: it does not need to actively monitor everyone at all times. Instead, the sheer awareness of the fact that monitoring is possible, that

consequences are real, that family members are vulnerable, is enough to make most people self-monitor.

The chilling effects of this kind of surveillance extend beyond individual and create profound distrust within diaspora communities. When anyone could potentially report back to authorities and when genuine community members might face pressure to provide information –trust becomes nearly impossible.

* * *

The journalist in the Netherlands who received that first call on her Dutch number in 2023 knows all this. She knows the mechanisms and risks. She continues with her work anyway, but not without cost.

“I think that may be one of the effects,” she reflects, and continues by explaining how difficult it is to voice her own opinions, and feel that she is in the minority, without knowing all of it for sure. “There might be more people who think like us. It is just that we cannot find each other.”

The surveillance succeeds when it isolates. When people who might support one another do not know about each other’s existence. When dissent appears rare because dissidents stay hidden and fear spreads faster than solidarity.

Welcome to transnational digital authoritarianism and welcome to the age of surveillance without borders.

* * *

But the surveillance does not always succeed in silencing. People develop strategies. Sophisticated, nuanced, constantly evolving strategies for navigating between worlds, managing risk, and carving out spaces of relative freedom within systems of control.

These are not just coping mechanisms, but forms of resistance, acts of agency, and creative adaptations to impossible circumstances. Exploration of these strategies does not reveal passive victims but active navigators –people making difficult choices fully aware of the trade-offs.

The first and most fundamental choice is which platforms to use –and how.

This is not a simple decision, but a complex calculation involving family connections, practical needs, security concerns, cultural preferences, and integration goals. Different people resolve this dilemma in different ways, creating distinct patterns of platform usage that reflect their individual circumstances, risk tolerance, and priorities.

THE DISCONNECTED

Some people make the cleanest break possible and cut ties with Chinese platforms all together.

The logic here is simple: if a platform operates under Chinese jurisdiction, it is compromised. Better to use platforms beyond Chinese government reach –YouTube

for videos, Signal or Telegram for messaging, X for social media, Western news sites for information.

For some, this choice comes from direct experience of harassment and threats. For others, it is a precautionary measure: cutting off vulnerability before it can be exploited. And for a few, it is more philosophical and symbolizes a rejection of participation in systems designed to control.

But this strategy comes with real costs.

First, family communication problem. If your family only uses WeChat, going off the grid means cutting yourself off from them. Or forcing elderly family members to learn new technologies, which may be difficult or impossible.

Second, the practical information gap. As discussed previously, Chinese platforms carry essential information about living in Europe. Disconnecting means losing access to this practical support network. You have to rely on European-language sources even for information about Chinese communities, which is often not available or hard to find.

Third, the cultural isolation. Chinese cultural content, discussions, intellectual communities –much of this happens on Chinese platforms. Cutting yourself off means losing connection to contemporary Chinese culture, missing conversations about books, films and ideas, and being unable to participate in the cultural life you grew up with.

The strategy of disconnecting therefore works best for people who already have a secure European status, have already built strong local networks, and can speak European languages. For others, the costs are simply too high. The cure –total disconnection –feels worse than the disease.

THE CAREFUL

Most people cannot or will not completely disconnect. Instead, they develop what might be called “careful usage” strategies –maintaining presence on Chinese platforms but with extreme caution and meticulous self-censorship.

“I am politically cautious,” one interviewee explains. “My parents are very traditional communist party members, and the information they receive is all through domestic channels. Sometimes I would want to disagree with that, especially because my mom likes to read the Reference News, but I will not.”

The Careful maintain WeChat accounts, participate in family group chats, follow Chinese news, engage with Chinese cultural content –but they are constantly aware of surveillance and adjust their behavior accordingly.

They never discuss politics. They stick to safe topics, like weather. They use multiple account and pseudonyms, and compartmentalize the use of social platforms. They frequently self-censor and avoid sensitive topics like Xinjiang, Tibet, or Taiwan.

The Careful strategy allows people to maintain important connections while managing risk. They can talk to family, access practical information, participate in cultural spaces –just within carefully managed boundaries.

THE HYBRID

Many people develop more sophisticated approaches, using different platforms for fundamentally different purposes and maintaining separate digital lives across different ecosystems.

The core principle: compartmentalization. Chinese platforms for family, culture, and local practical information. European/international platforms for politics, sensitive topics, and intellectual engagement outside Chinese state control.

The hybrid approach recognizes that different platforms serve different functions, and that complete disconnection is not necessary or desirable. You can maintain valuable aspects of Chinese platform usage while creating separate spaces for content that would be risky to engage with on monitored platforms.

But it requires constant management. Remembering which topics can be discussed where, making sure you are logged into the right account before posting, maintaining mental separation between your different digital selves. Such compartmentalization can feel exhausting.

THE DEFIANT

And then there are those who refuse to be silenced, who continue speaking out despite knowing the risks, and who have made peace with consequences.

“I asked myself: what am I afraid of?” one media professional reflects after turning down a job due to surveillance concerns. “Yes, I know I am afraid of the future. But what kind of future? I moved out of China more than 15 years at that time. And I work in media. Where does this fear come from? If next time this kind of opportunity comes, maybe I will just do what I want to do. I should throw this kind of fear away.”

The Defiant have accepted that speaking out means accepting consequences. They know that their families might face pressure, that they might not be able to return to China safely, and that Chinese authorities monitor their activities. But they proceed anyway.

Their strategies often include being fully aware of the risk and building lives that do not depend on China access, as well as undertaking various protective measures (VPNs, encrypted messaging) and accepting that family relations will be strained while continuing to produce content for audiences in China.

This path requires having a secure status in Europe, a career or financial situation that does not depend on China, emotional resilience to handle the pressure, and finally a sense of moral purpose strong enough to justify the costs.

Not many people can or will choose this road. But those who do play a crucial role: they represent voices that would otherwise be silenced, create content that audiences in China desperately need, and demonstrate that not everyone submits to surveillance and control.

* * *

Underlying all these strategies is the previously discussed dilemma: the same platforms that help you integrate into European life also expose you to Chinese state surveillance.

For the Disconnected, this means navigating European bureaucracy without the peer support network that Chinese platforms provide.

For the Careful and Hybrid, it means accepting a permanent state of partial surveillance in exchange for practical benefits.

The Defiant often sacrifice these integration benefits entirely, choosing principle over convenience, and safety over support.

There is no good solution. This is simply the reality of transnational digital authoritarianism.

* * *

Yet despite all the surveillance, self-censorship, and exhaustion –people persist. The Chinese state has extended its reach and control within Europe. But it has not succeeded in completely silencing, controlling, and breaking connections between Chinese people abroad and their cultural and family roots.

The navigation continues and strategies evolve. People learn from each other, share information (albeit carefully), and develop sophisticated approaches. The cat-and-mouse game between control and resistance continues.

And from these individual navigation strategies, something larger emerges: communities, culture, resistance. Despite everything that has been designed to prevent it.

The third space and the parallel polis

One question coming up constantly and in various forms is: “Are you more Chinese or European?” It assumes a binary –that identity is a zero-sum game, that becoming more of one means becoming less of the other, and finally that you must eventually choose. But for many Chinese people living in Europe, the answer is more complex.

“I do not want to be seen as an immigrant,” one interviewee says. “I want to be a human being. I want to be deeply involved in social circles and culture.” Another interviewee puts it more bluntly: “I identify as an earthling.”

These answers are not evasions or refusals to engage with the question. They are attempts to articulate something different –a third space existing beyond the binary of Chinese/European, a position that is neither assimilation nor preservation, but something else entirely.

* * *

The phrase that comes up repeatedly in interviews, across different cities, backgrounds, and life situations is: “I am in between.”

It does not refer to a temporary state, but to a transitional phase on the way to becoming fully European. It is a position unto itself –drawing from multiple cultural sources while being reducible to none of them.

For some, this “in-betweenness” feels frustrating, even oppressive. No matter what you do, how long you have lived in Europe, how fluent your language, or how deep your local integration is, you are, in most people’s eyes, still Chinese above all else. This label precedes you, shapes your perception, and limits how you are understood.

* * *

For many, living in Europe triggers a process of actively reconsidering what it means to be Chinese –questioning assumptions, unlearning patterns, and rebuilding identity from examined pieces rather than inherited wholes.

“I think I have lost some of my Chineseness since I left China,” a young professional in Denmark says. But what does that “Chineseness” mean?

She elaborates: “I think I have dropped some of the meritocracy and family and social relationships. After living in Europe, I care more about whether I am happy or not. When I was in China, people cared more about themselves, the society, or whether you are successful or not.”

In this case, the identity is not a fixed heritage, but an active choice. It is not “I am Chinese because I was born there” but rather “I choose which aspects of Chinese culture and values to keep and which to reject.”

Europe thus becomes a vantage point for critically examining China. Not a wholesale accepting or rejecting, but evaluating piece by piece: this approach to family relationships feels healthier, this attitude toward work-life balance resonates more, this emphasis on individual happiness over collective success makes sense.

But the process works both ways. Living in Europe also reveals its limitations, blind spots, and cultural assumptions that are not universal truths but particular choices.

The ability to critique both, see the strengths and weaknesses of each from the outside –this is the gift of the in-between position. You are no longer fully inside either system, so you can see both more clearly.

* * *

But Chinese communities in Europe are not monolithic in their relationship to identity. Different generations, waves of migration, and circumstances of arrival create different relationships to the question of belonging.

Consider the landscape in Amsterdam, for instance.

There is the “restaurant generation” of people who came in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily from Fujian and Zhejiang provinces. There is the “student wave” of people who came in the 2000s and 2010s for education. And then there is the second generation: those born in Europe or who arrived as young children.

The restaurant owner's grandchild and the recent arrival's child might both be “Chinese” in European census categories, but their lived experiences, their cultural references, and their sense of belonging have almost nothing in common.

* * *

In all this, language becomes a key realm where identity-shaping plays out. For example, the older Cantonese-speaking community and the newer Mandarin-speaking arrivals often cannot communicate easily.

This linguistic divide is not only practical but also emblematic of deeper cultural differences. The worlds these groups inhabit, the China they left, the values they carry, and the integration strategies they employ are shaped by when and why they came to Europe.

For those navigating between Chinese and European contexts, language choices become strategic. One interviewee describes becoming “Germanized”: “Now, you have to make an appointment with me and we have to negotiate in advance. I will tell you my availability, you pick a time that suits you and let me know, so that we can both prepare in advance.”

You become multilingual not just in language but in cultural codes, switching seamlessly (or not) between different sets of expectations, communication styles, and social norms.

* * *

But all this identity-shaping happens under the shadow of surveillance discussed above.

The way in which constant monitoring shapes identity is subtle but profound. When you know that expressing certain aspects of yourself might endanger your family, and when authentic self-expression carries real risks, then identity-shaping becomes self-protection.

One of the interviewees described attending graduation in hanfu (traditional Chinese clothing), as “the biggest breakthrough in my life so far.” But why is wearing traditional clothing a “breakthrough”? Because people have been so resistant and uncomfortable with the Chinese label constantly being applied to them.

The reality of surveillance means that claiming Chinese identity publicly, even in its cultural, non-political forms, carries implications. It means accepting that this label will follow you, that Chinese authorities will consider you a concern, and that certain boundaries can never be fully crossed.

For those who have chosen the Defiant strategy, this shapes identity in different ways. Accepting that you cannot return to China means accepting a permanent severing from certain aspects of your Chinese identity. You can maintain cultural connections, language, cuisine, art, but the physical homeland, the ability to participate in life there, the option to return –they all become unavailable.

* * *

Many describe identity seeking as moving through phases: initial rejection, gradual reconsideration, and eventual selective reinvention.

The rejection phase often comes early –right after arriving in Europe, discovering freedoms and perspectives unavailable in China, and experiencing relief of escaping certain pressures. During this phase, many actively distance themselves from their Chinese identity, avoiding Chinese communities, minimizing cultural participation, and emphasizing European integration.

For many, this phase gives way to reconsideration. Living in Europe reveals not just China’s limitations but also its richness. Distance allows for appreciation of cultural elements that felt oppressive when you were immersed in them, and absence creates longing for aspects of Chinese life you did not realize you valued.

This reconsideration does not mean being uncritical. It means a selective appreciation of cultural heritage, while maintaining distance from political system, social pressures, and aspects that felt unhealthy or restrictive.

And finally, the reinvention phase involves consciously choosing which elements of Chinese identity to keep, reject, and reinterpret –thus creating hybrid identities that honor heritage and incorporate new influences.

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However, for some, identity seeking does not equal philosophical exploration, but rather a process of creating a survival strategy.

For those most vulnerable to the Chinese state pressure –activists, journalists, people with certain family situations –maintaining some aspects of their Chinese identity becomes dangerous. The question is not “How much of my Chinese heritage do I want to preserve?” but rather “How much connection to China can I safely maintain?”

This creates a set of painful fragmentations. Wanting to participate in Chinese cultural life but knowing it is monitored. Wanting to maintain family connections but having to severely limit the degree of communication. Wanting to engage with Chinese intellectual communities but having to do so anonymously –or not at all.

“I am not sharing that I am applying for political asylum nor am I sharing any of my pictures from my life,” an activist explains their social media strategy. “Because if I share photos, there will be streets and scenes that can be recognized. Instead, I share my past photos on Twitter (X), so they cannot find out my whereabouts.”

Identity thus becomes compartmentalized out of necessity. The private self maintains the Chinese cultural connections, while the public self carefully manages the visible aspects of the Chinese identity. And as some of them must stay hidden –or abandoned entirely –for safety, this is not a freely chosen hybrid identity, but rather a coerced fragmentation.

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Despite all this complexity, surveillance pressure, in-betweenness, and generational divides, many express a vision of identity that transcends national categories entirely.

One interviewee states: “Ideally, I think if the citizens of the world could be a little less concerned with identity, maybe we would all be more comfortable, just living on one planet as human beings.”

Rather than naive cosmopolitanism ignoring real cultural differences, this view exemplifies a hard-won perspective from people who navigated multiple cultural contexts, saw the arbitrary nature of many identity categories, and learned that labels others impose rarely capture the lived experience.

“I also understand that everyone has a cultural background here, customs and so on, so it is actually quite difficult. But I think that identity should really be self-given, not socially defined” –the same person continues.

This vision of identity as self-determined, and of human connections as transcending national categories both represent aspirations that the third space makes possible. When you are no longer fully Chinese nor European, when you have learned to navigate between these worlds and developed critical distance from both, you can truly imagine alternatives to this binary.

* * *

But the third-space identity continues to evolve.

The physical location changes not just practical behaviors but also influences which aspects of identity feel primary, and which version of self feels more authentic.

This fluidity can feel exhausting, but it also creates a sophisticated, more nuanced form of belonging that rigid identity categories cannot capture.

The previously discussed second generation in particular seems poised to redefine what Chinese identity in Europe means. Growing up with multiple cultural influences –building transnational connections and hybrid identities –may lead to forging entirely new categories that their parents’ generation could not have even imagined.

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What is clear is that the old assimilation model does not explain the current situation. People are not simply becoming European and shedding their Chinese identity like an old coat. Nor are they simply preserving Chinese culture in European contexts, maintaining frozen cultural traditions divorced from their origins.

Something else is emerging: third spaces, hybrid identities, and transnational belongings that refuse the “either/or” categorization –complicated, messy, and constantly negotiated.

And from these third spaces, people build communities, create culture, resist control, and forge new forms of belonging.

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And here is the challenge: how to build a community when surveillance makes trust nearly impossible? How to create cultural spaces when participation might endanger you or your family? How to organize events when Chinese state agents might be watching, recording, and reporting back?

The answer lies in what scholars call the “parallel polis”: alternative social structures that exist alongside official channels where people can engage politically and culturally while managing security risks. This concept, borrowed from Central European dissident traditions, perfectly describes what Chinese migrants in Europe have been building, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

These are not just cultural preservation efforts, but acts of resistance, creativity, and community formation despite surveillance designed to prevent it.

* * *

Walk into a Chinese independent bookstore in Paris and you might see something remarkable: books about Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement sitting next to the very “red” pro-Xi Jinping volumes. Books from Mirror (理想国) and Frontline (在场), known for publishing intellectual content that would be censored in mainland China, displayed openly.

This juxtaposition –the coexisting politically divergent material –represents precisely what makes these spaces valuable. Freedom to present multiple perspectives without state censorship –a room for intellectual exploration impossible in China.

The past several years have seen a proliferation of such spaces across European capitals. Paris has become a hub: Phoenix Bookstore, WULOLIFE, 8litheque (rated as one of the best independent bookstores). Germany has Berlin 706, which collaborates with university departments and functions as a cultural center, and Blaues Haus Stiftung, a literary foundation serving as both cultural group and Chinese book

library program. The Netherlands has Nowhere Bookstore, which recently expanded from Taipei.

These bookstores transcend commercial function. They host cultural events, political discussions, and civic engagement activities. “During the mobilization for the parliamentary elections last year, one of the activities that we organized was in that bookstore, mainly for Chinese speakers,” one interviewee describes an event at Espace F360 in Paris. “We informed them what the election was about and what they needed to do.”

The bookstores become community centers, meeting places, and spaces where Chinese people can gather around shared cultural interests while maintaining connection to the intellectual life that the Chinese state would censor.

But these physical spaces carry inherent vulnerabilities.

They are visible. Their locations are known. Anyone can walk in, including Chinese state agents, nationalist students who might report back, or people with conflicting political views. The openness that makes them valuable also makes them risky.

Even community organizations and cultural spaces that appear apolitical can suddenly activate themselves for Chinese state purposes during sensitive moments. This creates constant wariness about which spaces are genuinely independent and which might be monitored or controlled.

The geographical distribution is also uneven. Paris and Berlin have relatively rich ecosystems. Other major European cities have far less. These spaces are fragile, dependent on committed individuals, vulnerable to economic pressures, and susceptible to political tensions within communities. Their closure represents not just loss of a retail space but loss of crucial community infrastructure.

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Apart from bookstores, film festivals and independent cinema screenings have also emerged as crucial community-building venues, particularly effective because film provides less directly confrontational way to engage with sensitive topics.

The NewGen Film Festival and the Chinese Indie Cinema in Berlin, or the East Asia Film Festival in Dublin –they serve multiple functions beyond entertainment. A documentary screening series in Paris focused on COVID-19, renting venues in movie theaters to screen films about topics censored in China –this creates spaces for collective reflection on sensitive political and social issues.

The films themselves become discussion touchpoints through which people process shared experiences of displacement, changing identity, or other topics that might feel too direct to discuss openly but become accessible via cultural analysis.

But even film screenings require security awareness.

At a documentary screening about the White Paper protests, organizers included this note: “In order to protect yourself, you can wear a mask. You can be identified by a nickname, and we have to respect each other’s boundaries.” Even in Europe, even at cultural events, the surveillance reality shapes participation.

“So, I think that even at those events we could not fully express ourselves. It depends on the person and the location. But there is always this fear in the back of our heads. You know that there might be someone from the embassy there, or that there

might be someone who can take photo of us, who may identify us,” one interviewee reflects. “So, I guess that is self-censorship. And the fear is very deeply rooted.”

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Chinese-language independent media have flourished in Europe, filling crucial gaps that neither Chinese state outlets nor the European ones address adequately.

Publications like the Initium Media provide nuanced Chinese affairs coverage without state censorship constraints. YouTube channels run by former Chinese journalists like Chai Jing produce independent content. Podcasts create intellectual communities across borders.

But these platforms also face complications. “If I were to write in English, it would be very difficult to get that out. Often, I can only write cultural commentary in the Chinese media, which may be outside the country, but it is still media oriented toward Chinese readers.”

This highlights a dual reality. These platforms provide essential outlets for Chinese-language journalism and cultural production that would be censored in China. But they also exist in an isolated ecosystem, primarily reaching Chinese-speaking audiences, somewhat separate from broader European public discourse.

The contributors often navigate significant risks. Those who write for independent media using real names must carefully assess which topics they can cover without endangering themselves or their families. Some use pseudonyms and others accept that they cannot return to China safely.

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The parallel polis enables social movements that face suppression in China.

VaChina, a Chinese feminist society in the UK, organizes regular events and discussions. Seahorse Planet (海马星球), a feminist podcast community, organized a large female-only gathering in Berlin with over 200 participants from around the world in 2023.

For many, migration enables more open expression of the LGBTQ+ identity. Europe provides freedoms that are unavailable in China, where same-sex relationships face significant social stigma and have no legal recognition.

But even these movements must navigate security concerns. “It is common for Chinese protesters, especially students, to wear masks and sunglasses to cover their faces when they want to go protest,” an activist notes. “And this is, of course, because they are afraid that if they do not do this, they will never be able to get back to China.”

The fear is well-founded. “This year during June 4 gatherings, I was hoping there would be some protest in a certain EU country, but in the end, the Chinese protesters were only from the older generation who, just like me, are seeking political asylum here. So, for us there was nothing to be afraid of because we are not going back to China. But most of my friends who have families, belong to communities, or are students, they just decided not to show up because there was a huge risk.”

Compare this to a feminist march: “Dozens of us” participated because “feminism is considered a safe topic” –one interviewee notes.

The risk calculation is constant. Tiananmen June 4 commemorations feel too dangerous for students with families in China. Feminist marches feel safe enough for broader participation. Each event requires assessment: what is the political sensitivity? Who might be watching? What are the potential consequences?

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The trust networks operate through personal, relationship-based connections rather than centralized structures. They provide protection. There is no central organization to infiltrate and no membership lists to compromise. Just organic networks of people who trust each other, built up gradually, through personal connection.

But this also creates limitations. These invisible support networks exist primarily for those most at risk: activists, journalists, and people engaged in politically sensitive work. For broader community, cultural participation, and less politically charged activities, the security infrastructure is less developed.

APPROACHES TO EVENT PARTICIPATION ADOPTED BY CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE

Using masks and pseudonyms: They allow people to participate without full identification and allow for respecting different risk tolerance –some feel safe showing faces, others do not.

Careful vetting of participants: For more sensitive events, organizers rely on personal connections and recommendations rather than open publicity.

Selective information sharing: Not everyone needs to know everything. Information distributed is based on trust levels and need-to-know basis.

Being aware of potential infiltration: Assumption that some people at events might report back to Chinese authorities connected with the acceptance of this risk and an attempt to minimize it through trust networks.

Respecting different levels of risk tolerance: Explicit recognition that people have different vulnerabilities. Those with families in China face different risk calculus than those seeking asylum. Different security needs must be respected.

Photographing policies: Many events have explicit rules about photography: no photographing faces without permission, no posting photos publicly that could identify participants, and understanding that facial recognition technology makes identification possible.

This security-driven consciousness shapes how communities form –in a less spontaneous manner than it could have been otherwise. More deliberate, more careful, and more aware of potential consequences.

But they exist. Despite surveillance, risks, and the Chinese state's efforts to fragment and isolate, communities form, cultures flourish, and resistance takes place.

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Some of the most effective resistance takes creative forms: art, literature, film, and music that are harder to suppress than direct political organizing.

These cultural productions serve multiple functions. First, they offer a means of expression under constraint. Art allows individuals and communities to process political and social experiences through metaphor, symbolism, and indirect commentary, in ways that are harder to censor or punish than direct political statements.

They also serve a documentary function. Independent films, literature, or oral traditions can record experiences that official narratives erase, preserving memories, perspectives, and forms of testimony that might otherwise disappear.

At the same time, cultural production contributes to community building. Shared cultural experiences create bonds, validate identities, and provide spaces for collective meaning-making, particularly among communities navigating displacement, political pressure, or social marginalization.

Finally, cultural content may also reach audiences in China in ways that explicitly political material often cannot. A film, a song, or a piece of writing can sometimes penetrate Chinese internet censorship more effectively than political manifestos, reaching audiences that more direct forms of dissent never could. The content produced in European diaspora spaces reaches China through informal networks and VPN users. It creates informational and cultural bridges that official censorship cannot completely sever.

This circulation represents a form of transnational resistance, using European freedoms to produce content that Chinese audiences access, and maintaining intellectual and cultural connections that the Chinese state would prefer to break.

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But the parallel polis is not always harmonious. Security concerns create internal tensions and conflicts within communities.

Different people have different risk tolerances and their approaches can create friction. The public activists might feel others are not doing enough, whereas the more careful ones might feel the public activists are reckless, and endanger the whole community.

Pro-Beijing community members add another layer of complexity. Some genuinely support Chinese government, while others might be plants or people under pressure to report. How do you build community when you cannot trust everyone who shares your cultural background?

The surveillance creates paranoia, sometimes justified, sometimes excessive, but always present. This paranoia fragments communities that might otherwise unite and creates barriers between people who share similar experiences and goals.

At universities, students from mainland China are often wary of each other. The Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) add another layer of complexity.

These organizations, often with Chinese embassy connections, exist at many European universities. Some are genuinely student-run and apolitical. Others clearly serve Chinese government interests. Students must thus navigate carefully.

There are also the Chinese student scholarship recipients. “The students are required to sign a document stating that they must be loyal to the CCP ideology, even if they are studying abroad. And they must report to the Chinese embassy about their surrounding events, like once a month,” says one interviewee.

The presence of scholarship students who are contractually obligated to report to the embassy creates justified wariness. But it also creates unjust suspicion toward Chinese students more generally, fragmenting community based on fear rather than actual evidence.

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Despite all these challenges, the parallel polis continues evolving, adapting, and finding new approaches.

Communities learn from close calls and mistakes. When someone faces consequences for insufficiently careful behavior, others learn, security protocols improve, and best practices get shared through trust networks.

“The trouble of this generation is that they have grown up in a voiceless and not-so-trusting environment. They are hurt mainly because they cannot trust,” one interviewee observes.

But from this pain comes sophisticated security culture, mutual support systems, and protective practices that enable community formation despite surveillance.

The COVID-19 pandemic and White Paper protests catalyzed new energy. Many who used to be apolitical found themselves radicalized by zero-COVID policies, by seeing protests brutally suppressed and watching their friends and family suffer. This created a surge of people willing to engage with independent cultural spaces, attend events, and support parallel institutions.

“This awakening has contributed to the flourishing of alternative spaces and narratives,” one interviewee adds.

And there are success stories. Bookstores, film festivals, media outlets, feminist and LGBTQ+ communities –the fact that these spaces exist at all represents remarkable resilience and creativity.

The parallel polis –built on the foundation of third spaces –is thus a proof that community building is possible despite surveillance. That the Chinese state’s efforts to isolate, fragment, and control overseas communities are not entirely successful. And finally, that people find ways to connect, support each other, and build shared spaces despite everything designed to prevent it.

The voices emerging from the shadows

December 3, 2022, Berlin. The first snow of the winter has fallen.

At Alexanderplatz, young Chinese people begin gathering, mostly the post-1990s generation: students and recent arrivals, people that grew up with the internet and smartphones, who never knew China without the constant surveillance.

They are there to march to the Chinese Embassy to protest zero-COVID policies. To stand in solidarity with demonstrations sweeping across China after the Urumqi fire killed at least 10 people in an apartment building whose exits were sealed as part of pandemic control measures.

But they are in Europe, not China and they have choices unavailable to protesters in Shanghai or Beijing.

Some cover their faces with masks or wear sunglasses to keep their identities hidden. Others choose to show themselves openly –with names and faces –accepting the consequences.

Both choices require courage and involve calculated risk. Neither of them is a wrong one.

This was the White Paper Movement arriving in Europe –the first mass political mobilization of young Chinese in European cities in a generation –and it revealed everything about how public expression works under transnational surveillance.

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What made Berlin's protest remarkable was not just that it happened –though that was significant in itself too –but rather how it happened, and what the different approaches revealed about surveillance's impact on political expression.

The march route was planned –from the Alexanderplatz to the Chinese Embassy along the Spree River. Protesters were holding blank sheets of paper, the same ones present during protest in China –a symbol of silent rebuke to censorship, where even holding nothing could be seen as an act of resistance.

But the Berlin participants made wildly different calculations about personal safety:

Many wore face covers or sunglasses –anything to obscure identification fearing that they might not be able to come back to China. The fear is well-founded. They know the Chinese embassy staff might photograph attendees and the facial recognition technology could identify them. Then this information could flow back to authorities in China and consequences might follow –not just for them, but for their families in China as well.

But other protestors chose visibility. Some had already accepted they could not safely return to China. Others had asylum status or permanent European residence, or felt their moral obligation outweighed any personal risk.

“For us there was nothing to be afraid of because we are not going back to China,” an asylum seeker notes, explaining why older generation activists could protest openly. They already paid the price of exile and had nothing left to lose by speaking publicly.

And then there were those who did not come at all. Maybe they wanted to or felt the pull of solidarity, but simply could not accept the risks.

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For those who want to express themselves on sensitive topics but cannot afford complete openness, sophisticated anonymity strategies emerge. These include using separate pseudonyms and social media accounts for writing and activism; using coded language and metaphors, thus pursuing an art of speaking in ways that insiders comprehend but outsiders might miss; and finally maintaining plausible deniability. If challenged, one may claim to have been merely discussing art, analyzing history, or asking theoretical questions –not about China specifically, but simply pondering more general points –which allows for a retreat into ambiguity when necessary.

These strategies enable expression while managing the risk. But they come with costs –limited authenticity, muted voices, and constant awareness of boundaries even in supposedly free European spaces.

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But such resistance is not just individual. Entire communities develop collective protection strategies. The “know your rights” workshops teaching Chinese students and migrants about their legal rights in European countries; sharing knowledge on security culture practices; supporting those already targeted and providing legal resources for those in need; and finally, not pressuring anyone beyond their capacity and willingness. All of it creates solidarity despite different individual choices.

Not all forms of resistance require explicit public protest. Works of art may process political experiences through metaphor; bookstores, media outlets, and cultural spaces create realms for uncensored discussions and help build bridges with European societies. The sheer transfer of knowledge and best practices regarding surveillance is also a form of not-so-visible resistance. And finally, the small acts of defiance like refusing to self-censor in private conversations or maintaining connection to banned books or films –because not everything needs to be a grand gesture.

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The surveillance has not succeeded in completely silencing the diaspora. It has shaped how its members express themselves, made them more cautious, and created enormous psychological burdens. But it has not succeeded in achieving total control.

European freedoms also matter. The ability to gather, speak out, and organize. These freedoms enable resistance that are impossible in China.

And this resistance serves crucial functions. Diaspora activists are the voice of those silenced in China. They can document what the Chinese authorities would otherwise hide. They can provide hope and test boundaries of what is permissible – a never-ending tightrope walk.

And they continue walking. Carefully, courageously, and knowing the dangers – yet refusing to be completely controlled.

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But this is all within the Chinese diaspora. What about their integration into European societies?

What does this integration even mean for people living under transnational digital authoritarianism? How do you “integrate” yourself into a European society when the Chinese state extends its reach into your European life? What does belonging look like when you are constantly navigating between worlds, when surveillance follows you across borders, when connection to origin is both sustenance and vulnerability?

* * *

The word “integration” itself is a contested terrain and may have various definitions.

Traditional assimilation model says: you first learn the language, then adopt local customs, and then eventually become indistinguishable from the native population.

Multiculturalist model says: you maintain heritage while participating in the new society. It paves the way for the “hyphenated identities,” like “Chinese-European.”

Then there is the perception of integration as practical participation: your cultural identity is secondary, what matters is whether you work, pay taxes, follow laws, and engage with civic institutions – in other words, whether you properly function economically and socially.

And finally, the perception of integration as emotional belonging: do you feel welcomed, at home, and as part of the community? Do institutions and fellow residents treat you as “theirs?”

Many Chinese people in Europe experience radical lack of connection between these definitions. They might score high on practical participation – are employed, pay taxes, abide by the law – while feeling zero emotional belonging due to persistent “othering.”

“I think that essentially my migration to the UK has nothing to do with my need to be British. I probably needed a more efficient travel document, but I do not really identify with Britishness. I do not really care about that either,” one interviewee admits.

It is a case of instrumental integration: acquiring documents for mobility rather than seeking identity transformation or emotional connection.

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Many interviewees describe how European systems themselves create integration barriers. These systems demand cultural integration while creating bureaucratic nightmares. “The whole immigration policy emphasizes that you have to learn the local language, and that is a barrier to immigrants integrating here. Because sometimes immigrants do not come here for cultural attraction, it may be more that they feel that the country can offer something that they want.”

The critique is that European countries are not traditional immigration nations like the US, Canada, or Australia. They demand cultural assimilation, language learning, and adoption of certain values, while providing limited practical pathways to achieving a stable status.

“For a modern immigrant, this definition itself is old-fashioned and outdated,” one interviewee notes. Modern migrants often move for opportunity, safety, career advancement, and not because they specifically yearn for German, French, or British identity.

But some Chinese communities’ members feel European systems judge integration by cultural markers rather than practical contributions. They also present bureaucratic burdens: visa complications, residence permit renewals, and employment restrictions, which create constant precarity preventing genuine integration regardless of cultural adaptation.

“When I came back from Perugia last week, I did not have any stickers in my passport because the UK uses e-visa now. I had to wait for twenty minutes to get a boarding pass. At this point, I was a Chinese for sure,” one interviewee describes bureaucratic “othering” that persists despite years in Europe.

Another issue they describe is language barriers: government information, support services, and legal resources are often available only in local languages. While language learning is important, the lack of linguistic accessibility during the learning period creates integration barriers.

There is also the feeling of invisibility in policy discussions: “I think what is specific to the Chinese community is that they need to realize we exist,” one interviewee says about the European policy discourse. “People’s impression of us might be that we work hard, and then we just naturally integrate, so no help is needed.”

It is a model minority stereotype: Chinese migrants are self-sufficient, naturally integrate, and need no assistance, which makes their actual needs invisible to policy makers.

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And then there is the surveillance dimension discussed above.

It creates integration complications European policy rarely acknowledges. For example, the previously discussed safety concerns, which limit possibility of participation; or vulnerability of your family in China, which prevents you from expressing yourself.

Integration that requires silence is not a genuine integration. So, how do you engage authentically when you are always being monitored or monitoring yourself?

European integration models do not account for the impact of transnational authoritarianism. They assume immigrants face typical adaptation challenges –language, culture, and bureaucracy –not state surveillance following them across borders.

* * *

Even the second generation of Chinese immigrants –those born in Europe or arriving here as young children –face complications.

They grow up speaking European languages natively, navigate local institutions with ease, and often have little direct connection to China beyond family stories and occasional visits. Yet they are often still seen as predominantly Chinese. This racial/ethnic label persists regardless of cultural integration.

What is more, even with their minimal connections to China, they can still face surveillance if they engage with politically sensitive topics, participate in Chinese diaspora activities, or maintain visible Chinese cultural identity.

The Chinese state views ethnicity as basis for claiming people –regardless of actual citizenship or cultural identity.

The second generation's experiences suggest that integration is not a linear progression toward assimilation. It is a creation of new forms of belonging, transnational identities, and diaspora consciousness that European integration frameworks do not anticipate.

Their feeling of being connected to multiple places simultaneously –not choosing between China and Europe but maintaining meaningful ties to both while creating third-space identities –is not a failure to integrate, but a new form of belonging suited to the era of globalization. Their ability to assess China and Europe critically is an asset, not a problem.

They bridge different worlds by navigating multiple contexts, speaking multiple languages, and understanding separate cultural frames. And when tensions rise, misunderstandings proliferate, and simplified narratives dominate, people with such nuanced understanding matter.

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Integration for Chinese people in Europe is therefore not a reached destination, but an ongoing process of negotiations.

The surveillance will not disappear. The Chinese state will continue reaching across borders, families at home will remain vulnerable, and the European systems will continue the “othering.” These challenges will persist.

But so will the resistance, community building, and strategic navigation. So will the courage to speak despite the risks and the determination to forge meaningful lives despite impossible circumstances.

The future Chinese communities in Europe are creating is not assimilation into Europe or preservation of China frozen in time. It is transnational, hybrid, and uniquely theirs.

And from these ongoing negotiations, new possibilities emerge –for the diaspora, for China, for Europe, and for understanding what human belonging means in an age where distance has collapsed but freedom remains unevenly distributed.

Conclusion: the journey continues

Let us return for a moment to that 2022 December afternoon in Berlin. Snow is falling on the Alexanderplatz and young Chinese people are gathering to march to the embassy, carrying blank white papers, the same symbol protesters in Shanghai and Beijing held up against zero-COVID policies, censorship, and three years of suffocating control.

Some wore masks to hide their faces. Others showed themselves openly. Both groups took real risks, made difficult calculations, and acted with courage.

But what made this moment historically significant was not just the political expression, though it mattered as well. It was what the protest revealed about how far things had shifted.

Just a decade earlier, such a demonstration would have been nearly unthinkable. Chinese students and recent migrants in Europe largely avoided political visibility –preferred to focus on their studies and careers –and maintained careful distance from anything that might draw attention or consequences. The few political exiles who had fled after Tiananmen remained isolated and their activism was disconnected from newer arrivals.

But 2022 White Paper protests showed a new generation willing to claim their voice in European spaces, to exercise their democratic rights despite transnational surveillance and to build community despite Chinese state efforts to fragment it.

This transformation –from silence to selective but determined expression –threads through every chapter of this book.

* * *

Throughout these chapters, we have also seen how people refuse simplistic categorizations.

Not pro-Beijing or anti-Beijing, but having a complex relationship with the Chinese state that varies by context and topic.

Not disconnected from China or controlled by China, but navigating connections while managing vulnerabilities they create.

Not assimilating into Europe or preserving Chinese culture frozen in time, but creating hybrid identities while drawing from both.

Not silent victims or fearless activists, but strategic actors making careful calculations about when to speak, when to stay quiet, and how to resist while protecting themselves and others.

The binary thinking of “you are either with us or against us,” –either Chinese or European, either integrating or isolating –fails to capture this lived reality.

What Robert E. Park predicted in 1922 –that distance would inevitably weaken homeland ties, and immigrant communities would naturally assimilate –has been

completely overturned by the digital age. Distance collapsed instead of growing and homeland connection intensified rather than faded.

But Park could not have anticipated that the collapsed distance would come with the surveillance attached. He could not have foreseen that every tool enabling connection would simultaneously enable control and that the Chinese state would extend authoritarian reach across borders, targeting diaspora populations thousands kilometers from Beijing.

This is genuinely a new situation. It is not just about migration in digital age, but also about migration under transnational digital authoritarianism.

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Taking all this into account, there are several points that demand attention from Europe's policy makers, civil society organizations, media, employers, and broader societies.

The Chinese state surveillance and intimidation of diaspora populations in Europe is a documented reality affecting thousands of people. This is not a domestic China issue, but a European security and human rights concern.

The assumption that Chinese migrants "naturally integrate" without any assistance makes them feel invisible and creates real harm. They face specific challenges: language barriers during transition, immigration policy obstacles, transnational surveillance pressures, and cultural space scarcity. These needs remain largely unaddressed because communities appear successful by conventional metrics while struggling in ways policymaking rarely recognizes.

There is no monolithic Chinese community. Restaurant owners from Fujian differ from tech workers, who differ from students, who differ from political asylum seekers –and the list goes on. They have different needs, integration patterns, and relationships to both China and Europe.

Expecting migrants to simply adopt European culture while providing limited practical pathways to achieving a stable status, creating bureaucratic obstacles, and treating them as perpetually foreign regardless of years spent in country –all this does not support a genuine integration. Recognizing that someone can live productively in European society while maintaining transnational connections needs to inform policymaking.

Independent bookstores, film festivals, community centers, and media outlets – these are not nice-to-have amenities, but instances of crucial infrastructure enabling healthy community formation, intellectual freedom, and cultural bridge-building.

And finally, many Chinese residents self-censor because they fear political activism might jeopardize their immigration status. Clear messaging that political criticism of foreign governments, participation in protests, and engagement with sensitive topics are protected expressions that will not harm their European status is much needed and matters.

* * *

So, given all these challenges discussed previously –what does hope look like?

It does not rely on naive optimism that everything will resolve neatly. Neither on pretending that surveillance and pressure will disappear, nor on expecting that European societies would suddenly understand the complex diaspora realities without continued effort.

Instead, it makes itself visible through sustained resistance; via the determination to maintain voice and community despite obstacles; growing awareness of European institutions, media, and public; generational changes; the arrival of alternative integration models; and finally, individual acts of courage –just as the ones seen during the White Paper protest in Berlin.

* * *

This book documents a moment in an ongoing story. Not its conclusion, but a chapter in its continuing evolution.

“I identify as an earthling. I want to be able to go wherever I want.”

This simple statement carries profound implications: a rejection of nation-state as the sole basis for identity, an aspiration for freedom of movement and belonging, and a refusal to be confined by the authoritarian control or nation-based categories.

Voices as this one are emerging from the shadows –claiming spaces between worlds, refusing silence despite surveillance, and building community despite fragmentation.

These voices matter.

They matter for diaspora communities themselves, creating spaces to exist authentically; for European societies learning to understand the complexities within their own borders; for people in China seeing alternatives to state narratives and knowing the resistance continues; and for the global conversation about how human belonging might work in an increasingly interconnected world where people move across borders, maintain ties across distances, and navigate multiple contexts simultaneously.

The story continues. The navigation continues. The resistance continues.

And from these ongoing processes, new possibilities emerge – for diaspora, for democracy, and for human belonging in transnational age.

About the author



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About CHOICE

The publication was prepared within the China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) collaborative platform. CHOICE is a think net of China experts providing informed analysis on the rising influence of the People's Republic of China within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. It is the largest network of China experts in the Central and Eastern European region, with more than 240 contributors from 30 different countries.

The network focuses especially on current issues in China affairs, maintaining a prolific publishing schedule so as to address up-to-date issues in real time. This includes multiple articles per week as well as monthly podcasts and cartoons. Debates, webinars, mentoring sessions, summer school, and other formats further highlight CHOICE's ability to engage experts and stakeholders via a myriad of avenues.

CHOICE is run by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a Prague-based foreign policy think tank and NGO.

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