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Abstract

This paper explores how the Chinese international students in France negotiated their national belonging during the Covid-19 pandemic in France through the (re)production and/or rejection of national discourses. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with Chinese international students were conducted between April and May 2023. The outcomes indicate that Chinese students negotiated their national belonging by oscillating between support for and rejection of French and Chinese governmental discourses on pandemic management. Additionally, some Chinese students framed discrimination in national rather than racial terms, strongly affirming their national belonging, while others downplayed discrimination to distance themselves from a Chinese belonging. Mask-wearing as a Chinese cultural practice, also served as a way to support to Chinese governmental health recommendations. On the contrary, others chose not to wear masks to avoid standing out. Lastly, the closure of the Chinese borders unsettled many Chinese students, revealing a strong sense of belonging and highlighting how their migration aspirations were shaped by national elements.

Keywords: Chinese international students; Covid-19 pandemic; national belonging; France.

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Introduction

China has steadily established itself as the first source of overseas students in the world since 1998, when the earliest UNESCO data were available. In 1997, Chinese represented 7% of the international students globally. In 2017, they were representing 17% (UNESCO Institute for statistics, as quoted in J. M. Liu, 2022, p. 703). With 1 billion of Chinese students studying abroad in 2024, they account for one in six international students in the world (Campus France, 2024, p. 18). This growing mobility results from the Chinese nationalist agenda to obtain greater global influence as transnational education plays a crucial role in the building of the Chinese nation (Jiang, 2021).

While Chinese students abroad have been characterized for their strong national sentiments (Hail, 2015; J. M. Liu, 2022; Zhao, 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic created new challenges that reshaped their experiences. Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, an upsurge of anti-Chinese sentiments was observed. Media and political figures, such as the American president Donald Trump, blamed Chinese and their government for the Covid-19 outbreak (see Guardian, 2020; L'Obs, 2020). In France, a warning rise of racist incivilities against individuals perceived as Chinese was reported during the pandemic. In a survey conducted in France on Chinese migrants and their descendants, about 33% of the respondents declared having experienced racism between January and September 2020 (Wang et al., 2020). In China, the closure of borders combined with the downsize of air flights and the government's directive to stay put resulted in Chinese overseas' exclusion from their national territory. Therefore, Chinese overseas found themselves trapped in a state of limbo, excluded from both their home and host countries. Studying their national belonging is crucial to understand their experiences amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

This working paper focuses on the case study of Chinese international students in France for several reasons. For Chinese international students, France is one of the most attractive European destinations and a top non-English-speaking destination on the global level. In 2024, Chinese represented the third-largest group of international students in the country (Campus France, 2024, pp. 18–20). During the last decades, the number of Chinese students in French universities progressed: While in 2002, they represented 5% of the international students in France, in 2017, they represented 9%, thus marking an important increase (Kablas-Langlois, 2019, p. 40).

Furthermore, despite the scale of the phenomenon, significant empirical gaps remain in research on Chinese international students in host countries, particularly in France. According to Li and Pitkaënen (2018, p. 107), two reasons can explain the lack of research on Chinese international students. First, this population is considered to be a "less problematic" migrant group because it is expected that they "naturally" integrate themselves. Second, international student mobility is often perceived as temporary. This assumption is no longer true as international students have become a key target in the global competition for the best and the brightest, a competition in which France actively participates.

The following research question will guide this paper: How did Chinese international students negotiate their national belonging during the Covid-19 pandemic in France? The concept of belonging is preferred over the term identity because it better accommodates the complex and often contradictory processes at play (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Knott, 2015). Moreover, using identity as a category of analysis may suppose the existence of a "real" national identity and thus, turns researchers into identity politic actors (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 6). This study indeed rejects the "realist, substantialist belief that 'a nation' is a real entity of some kind, though perhaps one that is elusive and difficult to define" (Brubaker, 1996, p. 14). The nation as a socially constructed and institutionalized discourse has nonetheless real impacts in the world (Özkirimli, 2017, p. 220).

This paper considers national belonging as a discursively constructed phenomenon and adopts a discursive approach to examine how it is constructed, with boundaries being maintained, reproduced and normalized in everyday interactions between ingroups and outgroups. This paper is based on 15 semi-structured interviews conducted between April and May 2023 for the purpose of my master thesis in Global Studies at Lund University, Sweden. The outcomes of this exploratory case study may not be generalized but I argue that the critical dimension at hand can provide valuable insights into a better understanding of minorities' belonging during national revivals.

This paper is structured as follows: The next section outlines the existing research and identifies key empirical gaps in the literature. It contextualizes how Chinese international students' national belonging is shaped from the Chinese state's and student' perspectives. The next section outlines how a discursive and bottom-up approach is used to analyze national belonging. The methodology section details data generation and analysis, along with considerations of positionality, ethics and limitations. The analysis then explores four key themes through which Chinese international students negotiated their national belonging during the Covid-19 pandemic, namely their opinions on French and Chinese anti-Covid-19 management, their perceptions and experiences of discrimination in France, their mask-wearing practices and finally, their migration aspirations.

Literature Review & Research Gap

Chinese Students' National Belonging: The Role of the State

The mobility of Chinese international students has been described as a politically laden project which entails China's economic and geopolitical interests. Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese government has strongly encouraged overseas graduates to return home to help the technological development of China through knowledge transfer. The returnees are often welcomed as patriots. At the same time, those who wish to stay in their new host country are provided more flexibility as they contribute to enhance the international reputation of the country abroad (J. M. Liu, 2022; Nyíri, 2001). As such, studies (e.g., Jiang, 2021; J. M. Liu, 2022) have documented how the People's Republic of China shapes Chinese students' national belonging abroad. In a 2013 speech delivered to the European and American Chinese Students Association, Xi Jinping emphasizes the need to foster nationalist sentiments among Chinese students abroad:

> "As a developing country, China needs overseas talent more than ever before… We believe that as long as the vast numbers of overseas Chinese students and scholars devote themselves to the prosperity and might of China and stand and fight together with our people, we will be able to write a glorious chapter in the achievement of the Chinese dream and the realization of the great revival of the Chinese nation" (Mo and Lu, as quoted in Binah-Pollak & Yuan, 2022, p. 182).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers have paid attention to the role of the media in constructing Chinese national belonging. Through media reports, Yang and Chen (2021) show that Chinese media heavily self-congratulated on its success to contain the virus while criticizing Western countries' ineffective and irresponsible response. Gao (2022) similarly argues that anti-Western transnational media played a key role in constructing Chinese overseas' sense of belonging, through the demonization of Western public health approach. Chan and Len's study (2024) bears similar outcomes: The authors studied how Chinese political elites discursively

constructed a so-called institutional superiority of China in managing the health crisis over the Western governance.

National belonging: Chinese students' perspective

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a very few studies have addressed Chinese international students' national belonging from their perspective. Based on 23 interviews with undergraduate students in a US university, Zhao (2020) explores the multiple meanings that Chinese students ascribe to their national identity. Three categories are identified: 1) rediscovering China, a category of students who reassessed their perspective on China and recognized advantages they had never noticed before; 2) Acting as ambassadors, a category of students who felt responsible for promoting a positive image of their country abroad, as talking about negative issues may reinforce the stereotypes against China and Chinese people; 3) Encountering another Chinese self, a group of students who began challenging many previously unquestioned assumptions after leaving China. In a study on cross-national interactions between Western and Chinese students, Hail (2015) also observes that studying abroad often reinforces Chinese students' national identity, increasing their desire to portray their home country in a positive light.

Due to the surge of anti-Chinese sentiment in the West, the Covid-19 pandemic provoked a gain of academic interest in Chinese overseas' experience, highlighting significant empirical gaps. Some studies have examined Chinese national belonging in relation to discrimination. Long (2022) looks at how experienced discrimination led UK-based Chinese students to feel a stronger connection to their home country, focusing solely on the emotional component of national identity i.e., whether or not Chinese students *feel* closer to their homeland, putting aside how identity can be practiced or performed. In a French context, a single study (Attané et al., 2021) has observed how Chinese belonging is shaped in relation to discrimination. The authors identified three different attitudes that Chinese adopted when facing discrimination: First, downplaying discriminations to re-affirm one's belonging to French society; Second, denouncing discriminations aligning with the idea of a double belonging between France and China; Third, remaining silent. Although this study offers valuable insights, the study understands Chinese as an ethnicity and not as a nationality – meaning individuals born in France and China were both considered. However, Chinese students are perceived as Others in both the social and legal sense. Additionally, as argued in the previous section, the state plays a key role in shaping the national belonging of Chinese students overseas. These differences may impact Chinese students' experiences compared to other Chinese groups. One last study (Q. T. Liu & Chung, 2023) has examined how US-based Chinese students re-negotiated their cosmopolitan ideals in the context of the US-Chinese geopolitical tensions. The authors interestingly shed light into how Chinese students' understanding of race and racism is shaped by a geopolitical lens.

Further research emphasizes on the importance of Chinese experience in relation to the geopolitical context. Gao's work (2021) has looked at how international relations have impacted Chinese migrants' mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic in Canada. He shows how Chinese migrants positioned themselves in relation to host and home countries' policies. Chinese migrants tended to endorse Chinese hygienic measures while losing faith in Canada' government to reduce the pandemic damages. At the same time, they were unable to go back to China due to travel restrictions. As such, they suffered from a double unbelonging. Next to that, some Chinese migrants suffered from social isolation for criticizing the Chinese government. Therefore, the experience of Chinese students is very dependent on the context of the host and home countries and the broader geopolitical context. As put by Hansen and Thøgersen (2015, p. 7): "Current political affairs add to long-term local understandings with the result that being Chinese means different things in different times."

Migration aspirations can also be a strong indicator of national belonging. In a longitudinal

study with 33 Chinese students living in 10 European countries during the Covid-19 pandemic, Ma et al.'s article (2023) shows that national identifications worked as a driving force of students' migration aspirations. National identifications helped Chinese students coping with involuntary immobility encouraged by the Chinese government. As they put: "What makes the Chinese international students case unique is that their willingness to stay was indeed further amplified and strengthened by the materials and messages sent by the homeland government" (Ma et al., 2023, p. 359).

Binah-Pollak and Yuan's study (2022) offers interesting insights into the phases that Chinese international students experienced while negotiating their national and international identities during the Covid-19 pandemic. 1) During the first months of the pandemic, Chinese students stayed put in their host country while they were sending medical supplies to their home country. The unique Covid-19 context aroused national consciousness and feelings of being part of their village. 2) The spread of the virus provoked a rise of anti-Chinese sentiment and anti-Asian racism in Western societies. At the same time, Chinese students' privileged position drew criticism from people in China. These events led Chinese overseas to question their sense of belonging and to retreat from the world. 3) From February 2020, as the pandemic situation worsened in the West, thousands of Chinese students returned back to China, a decision that provoked many hatred comments on social media as this mobility was perceived as opportunistic. As they returned to China, Chinese students were treated as foreigners, leading them to experience an identity crisis. 4) The last phase reflects the difficulty for Chinese students to find a balance between their national and international identities. Particularly, the Covid-19 aroused both Chinese national consciousness and an anti-Chinese sentiment in the West. Besides, as Chinese students perceived returning home as an expression of their patriotic feelings, Chinese in China perceived it as a threat to the nation's health security. The study was based on a digital ethnography of online forums conducted between January and July 2020. I argue that interviews can bring further depth and nuance to this study.

A final note is that these studies typically examine the Covid-19 crisis within a fixed timeframe, from January to June 2020, marking the period between the pandemic's outbreak and the initial availability of vaccines and more flexible pandemic strategies in the Western world. However, framing the crisis in a Western perspective and as a singular event with a beginning and an end, risks overlooking the ongoing challenges Chinese migrants faced even after the presumed resolution of the crisis. Crises are, in fact, dynamic and fluid, unfolding through different phases of intensity (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2020). Also, China's Zero-Covid policy extended well beyond the 2020 summer, likely shaping the experiences of Chinese overseas. To capture these evolving dynamics, my approach moves away from a rigid, event-based framing of the pandemic during the interviews, enabling a more nuanced understanding of Chinese students' shifting experiences while challenging a Western-centric perspective on the crisis's resolution.

A Discursive & Bottom-up Approach to National Belonging

Discursive approaches are commonly used in the study of national belonging because they allow for the exploration of how belonging is constructed, with boundaries being maintained, reproduced, and normalized in everyday interactions between ingroups and outgroups. In other words, (re)producing national discourses or distancing from them serves as a strategic means for individuals to negotiate their national belonging. A discourse is defined as a specific manner of *understanding* and *acting* in the world that becomes stabilized "through key institutional structures during certain historical periods" (Skey, 2011, p. 11). Enacted with regularity by social and institutional actors, the "discourse comes to be seen as objective and natural rather than one possible way of making sense of the world" (ibid, p. 12).

National belonging matters to individuals because it acts as a framework to make sense

of the world. It guides individuals in their relations with other people and help them to mutually recognize each other as members of the same national community. It provides ontological security through "familiarity, fixity and security for disparate individuals, in a world of increasing complexity and threats" (Skey, 2011, p. 36). However, national discourses can sometimes be rejected in favor of a cosmopolitan discourse. Skey nevertheless argues that these two are not necessarily opposed. For example, engaging with the Other e.g., going abroad, may often be underpinned by an ability to withdraw to home, a national territory, when needed. In fact, when national discourses are rejected, it is important to look at how conditional forms of cosmopolitanism are emerging, in relation to risk and safety perceptions:

> "It may be necessary to eschew the idea of the pure cosmopolitan, offered in contrast to the pure national, and focus attention on the emergence of more conditional forms of cosmopolitanism that… are often fragile and ultimately linked to wider perceptions of risk and safety" (Skey, 2011, pp. 146–147).

My approach draws inspiration from the everyday nationhood theories which emphasize how national discourses are mindlessly (re)produced in the everyday through habits and taken-for-granted symbolic systems, because they are a familiar part of the social environment (Billig, 1995, p. 38). This means that national belonging was neither mentioned nor imposed as an analytical category during the data generation phase. This approach also focuses on human agency as the participants are not considered as passive receptacles of top-down messages but as individuals who actively invoke, produce and sometimes reject national discourses. It aligns with the idea that national discourses are not solely an elitist phenomenon constructed from above (e.g., media, political leaders) and rather highlights the complex dialectic between top-down and bottom-up processes (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 554; Knott, 2015, p. 1,7).

Although this perspective highlights human agency, I also acknowledge the limitations of human agency. Agency depends on a set of resources that an individual possesses such as their financial means. Also, numerous aspects of daily life are not reflexively carried out, meaning other ways of being in the world are not even considered. At last, powerful institutions may play a role in defining and regulating numerous aspects of everyday life. For instance, the state inculcates particular forms of knowledge such as the understanding of health and safety (Skey, 2011, pp. 14–18).

Several criteria were used to identify Chinese students' national discourses. 1) The territory creates an idea of home, actual or imagined, which participates in the reshaping of social space into a national territory (Özkirimli, 2017, p. 221; Skey, 2011, p. 11). The notion of home is central to the national discourse. It conveys a sense of continuity to individuals and is a place where people can effortlessly engage with a range of everyday routines e.g., language and traditions, that are anchored within a national context (Skey, 2011, p. 139). 2) The cultural dimension refers to a system of values and norms which guide social actors (Skey, 2011, p. 11). Edensor (2002, p. 93) talks about a "national habitus" defined as a range of everyday embodied knowledge that consolidates the idea of what it means to be Chinese. This concept highlights that there is a set of normative practices that are considered as appropriate in particular national contexts. For example, wearing a mask is part of the Chinese culture (Goode et al., 2022, pp. 66–67); being devoted to one's family and country is also part of the Chinese national habitus. The family and the country demand a similar devotion because in the Chinese culture, China is considered to be a large family (Zhao, 2020, p. 2453). 3) Political organizations are an important component in the national discourse because they legitimize the discourses (Skey, 2011, p. 12). Supporting nationally defined institutions is a national performance that can offer symbolic rewards to the people, that is to say the right to belong to the national community (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008a, p. 543). 4) The Other is perceived to embody different *fixed* and *homogeneous* values than the Self, through processes of essentialization and collectivization. It concretizes the idea that the world is

divided into nations (Skey, 2011, p. 12). The analysis will examine both if and how Chinese international students engage in Othering practices, and how they perceive and experience being Othered in their host country. Importance of the elements of national discourses vary across time and space, as it depends on the political issue they are intended to address. The temporal dimension is a core component of national discourse but is not further developed here as it is not central in the analysis.

Methods

Data Generation

Data was generated with semi-structured interviews. This method is particularly well-suited to an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences from their perspective in their own words. The sampling was based on the following criteria:

- Individuals who lived in France in March 2020;
- Who were enrolled in a post-secondary education in March 2020;
- With a Chinese nationality at that time;
- Who were 18 years or older.

The criteria were kept broad as recommended for hard-to-reach populations. Chinese international students fall into this category because of a) their geographical remote locations as some of the participants were based in China at the time of the interview; b) their vulnerability e.g., in France, they may have experienced discrimination based on their race, language or nationality. Consequently, the recruitment combined various sampling methods to maximize the recruitment (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). A study invitation was posted on private Facebook and WeChat groups. At the same time, email invites were sent to approximately 50 Chinese associations based in France. I also reached out to my professional and personal network who put me in contact with potential participants. From then, I proceeded with snowball sampling.

The interview guide was developed based on a "wait and listen" approach (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 556) that is to say, national discourses and national belonging were not flagged in the questions, to not impose it as a category of analysis to the interviewees. Instead, Chinese international students came up with their own terms in order to see when and how they invoked national discourses. The interview guide was divided into the following sections: Experience of the Covid-19 pandemic in France; Perceptions on the French anti-Covid-19 policies; Perceptions of French population on Chinese; Perceptions on the Covid-19 pandemic in China from France; Migration aspirations during the pandemic.

A first pilot interview was conducted with a Chinese international student living in Sweden which allowed me to adjust particular questions for a better understanding. Interviews took place in either French or English on the platform Zoom to overcome spatial constraints. Interviews were conducted until data saturation i.e., new interviews did not provide new information and did not inform the development of new codes (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1408). In total, 15 interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes, were conducted between April and May 2023. The sample was composed of nine female and six male informants born between 1990 and 1999, who lived in France during the pandemic.

Data Analysis

A discourse analysis approach was adopted, drawing inspiration from Skey's methodology

(Skey, 2008, pp. 142–146). The approach drew on the tenets of the Viennese critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology. Critical discourse analysis aims to uncover the relations between the linguistic structures and practices, and emphasizes on the relationship between discourse and wider structures of power (Wodak et al., 2009, pp. 9–10). In contrast, discursive psychology focuses on everyday talk, and stresses out the ways in which people actively and creatively use discourse as an "interpretative repertoire" to complete social actions (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). From this stance, a three-level discourse analysis was adopted.

At the micro level, linguistic features were on focus. For example, the analysis focused on the creation of inside-outside category such as the "us versus them" rhetoric; Metonymy, synecdoche and personification as they create an idea of "sameness between people" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 43). However, the analysis did not intend to address linguistic features as a check-list, but rather in a context-sensitive approach. At the meso level, intertextuality was used to unpack unquestioned knowledge about national belonging. The focus was made on the ways in which particular narratives drew "on the same ideas, language, background knowledge and symbols" (Skey, 2008, p. 145). Intertextuality was enhanced via the repetition of a specific narrative, for example from the state, political leaders or the media. Intertextuality was also achieved with the recontextualization of the data, because the participants often referenced to particular context to articulate their arguments (ibid, p. 146). At the macro level, the characteristics of national discourse detailed earlier were on focus. It allowed to replace national discourses within wider historical structures.

Positionality, Ethical Considerations, & Limitations

Stemming from a constructivist standpoint, I agree with Billig (1995, p. 125) that researchers should confess about their own role in the dynamics they are studying. Thus, I must recognize that my French belonging shapes the research process. This influence can manifest in various ways, such as through an affective dimension. For example, when experiencing homesickness, I often find comfort in enjoying an overpriced croissant from a French bakery. At the same time, my belonging intersects with other allegiances. I was raised in a French-Vietnamese culture and pursued three years of studies in Sweden. Although I am not an insider, I do not think that the boundaries between insiders and outsiders should be oversimplified to a matching process based on visible attributes such as gender or ethnicity. In alignment with Mullings (1999, p. 340), I consider positionality as a dynamic and negotiated process. During the interviews, I realized that some participants seemed uncomfortable criticizing the French people in my presence. To build trust and to appear "less French", I mentioned being of South-East Asian descent. As such, my positionality was continuously negotiated.

All interviewees completed a consent form. This included research summary, anonymity, confidentiality, the right to interpret and use the data, the data storage and the maximum storage time. The consent form was again discussed at the beginning of the interview and room for questions was left. The process was adapted depending on the participants' proficiency in French or English (Mason, 2018, pp. 93–98). Every interview excerpt was pseudonymized with a name based on the choice of the participants.

Because I do not speak Chinese, this likely discouraged potential interviewees from participating in the study. To address this issue, the recruitment message involved a paragraph that pointed out that participants could bring a friend to support the interpretation during the interview, although no participant used this option. To prevent linguistic difficulties and to establish a climate of trust between the participants and myself, the interview guide was sent before the interview.

Analysis & Discussion

French versus Chinese Pandemic Context: Chinese International Students, Ambassadors Overseas?

From January 2020 to December 2022, the Chinese administration applied a very strict Zero-Covid policy characterized by large-scale lockdowns, systematic Covid-19-testing and smartphone-based tracing of Covid-19 cases (Z. Li et al., 2020). During the first months of the pandemic, the Chinese diplomatic apparatus heavily promoted the effectiveness of government methods while criticizing the Western ineffective governance (Chan & Lee, 2024; Gao, 2022; Yang & Chen, 2021). In November 2022, nationwide protests bloomed and opposed the strict Chinese Covid-19 management (Chien et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the French authorities reported the first Covid-19 cases in January 2020 and implemented the first national lockdown marked by university closures and travel restrictions within and outside France. This first quarantine ended in May 2020 and was followed by two other national quarantines, during the 2020 winter and 2021 spring (Le Parisien, 2021; Vie publique, 2020). The French lockdowns became progressively less restrictive, contrasting sharply with the Chinese Zero-Covid policy which was still implemented.

In my interviews, Chinese students interpreted the pandemic by systematically comparing France and China. They also identified two key phases in the pandemic. Many evoked the access to anti-Covid-19 vaccines as a turning point and in particular, the start of the French vaccination campaign which was extended to the entire population by mid-June 2021 with no regards to one's nationality (French government, 2021).

During the first phase, all interviewees – except one student whose family was based in Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic – supported the efficiency of China's Zero-Covid policy while blaming the irresponsibility of the French government. Fang supported the Zero-Covid policy while fiercely criticizing the French pandemic management for its absence of stringent and long-term policies. According to her, France did not show responsibility up to the danger of the crisis: "In France, people are not very cautious... At the beginning, I saw that the situation in China seemed very serious to me… It's well controlled compared to France. The rules in France are not reasonable compared to China." This opinion was largely shared among my participants. Likewise, Tim upholds the idea that an efficient anti-Covid-19 management should be executed through the implementation of strict rules:

> "In comparison with France, China implemented strict lockdown measures. In China, I'll take the example of my parents: They had to do Covid-testing every day, every morning. Initially, it was daily, and then it became every two or three days and later on, it was once a week or twice a week. And when there were a few cases in the city, the entire population of the city had to get tested. Testing is life!"

What is interesting to highlight is that at this very early stage of the crisis characterized by a lack of information about the virus, the efficiency of a particular policy could not be strictly assessed. However, my participants automatically aligned with the Chinese government's discourse by supporting the Chinese lockdown, adopting as self-evident China's meaning of safety.

This almost instinctive support to Chinese policies and fierce criticism against the French way of governing may be due to the regular engagement of my participants with Chinese (social) media and their close contact with their family and friends back in China. Fang hypothesizes that these may have participated to shape her meaning of safety, showing how nationally defined institutions like media, can shape meanings of safety:

> "In my opinion, the rules in France are not very reasonable. I don't know if my

> thoughts are influenced by the (Chinese) news, but at that moment, I feel that this Covid is very serious, and one must be very cautious."

In the second phase of the pandemic, all interviewees endorsed the flexibility of French anti-Covid strategy. At the same time, they avoided overtly criticizing China's Zero-Covid policy. Some actually justified the need for such strict crisis management. The following extract from the interview I conducted with Rémi, illustrates the shift that occurred between the first and the second phases of the pandemic:

> "But in the second phase, I find that French policies are very good because we know that Covid is already less virulent (dangerous) and severe, and it's better to be more flexible… For example, we can eat at the restaurant, we can travel, but my friends back in China still told me it was dangerous… I don't think they knew Covid was less virulent compared to the beginning. At this time, the Chinese government kept on saying that Covid is really dangerous. They got influenced. All my friends are really worried at this time. But for me, Covid was not a big deal."

For the second phase of the pandemic, Rémi explains that the Chinese government influenced individuals' perceptions on the Covid-19 dangerousness. While living in France, he knew that the virus was not that dangerous. On the contrary, his friends in China prioritized the safety measures recommended by the Chinese government. As such, his exposure to discourses from French institutions re-shaped his initial perceptions on the Covid-19.

However, we should examine the reasons why Rémi like other interviewees, rejects the Chinese government's discourse on the Covid- 19 virus. As aforementioned, the shift in support to French policies occurred during the second phase of the pandemic which was characterized by the access to anti-Covid-19 vaccines. Therefore, this change of mind may be due to the decrease of uncertainty regarding the harmfulness of the virus. As people acquired more information about the virus and the availability of vaccines, they gained a clearer understanding of the situation and felt no longer at risk. This growing clarity may have influenced their perspectives and preferences regarding French policies. In fact, Rémi's support for French policies was closely connected to his risk perceptions associated with the Covid-19.

Although my participant agreed with the liberty guaranteed by French policies, they did not explicitly criticize the Chinese Zero-Covid policy during the second phase of the pandemic. They rather showed less solidarity, like Rémi:

> "China was following the Zero-Covid policy with a very strict lockdown… It is really strict, but there are not that many Covid cases at this time so I can understand. This is for protecting all Chinese citizens' lives. At first, I was agreeing with such policies but after, I don't really understand (embarrassed)."

Rémi avoids tackling the negative aspects of the Chinese governance, remaining purposefully vague. The strong discomfort felt when addressing the subject prevented the conversation from being explored any further. In fact, a few interviewees even justified the authoritarian pandemic management of China, such as Inès: "We cannot really compare France and China, they are different. In China, we have a huge population, we cannot do the same in China. If we let the people choose, it will take too much time." In this extract, Inès firmly locates herself as Chinese by repetitively using the pronoun "we", which functions as a metonymy to represent all Chinese people. She argues that France and China's management are not comparable. She explains the need for the strict and quick implementation of policies in China justified by the size of the population. In other words, she justifies anti-democratic policies based on demographic arguments, showing her desire to promote a positive image of China abroad. Her discourse

reproduces and supports the Chinese government's message.

My participants not only negotiated their national belonging in relation to French and Chinese policies, but also in relation to the national mindset of the Chinese and French populations during the pandemic. In their terms, Chinese were more rule-abiding than the French, as Christine argues:

> "In China, there is a sense of universality. We are part of a collective effort, trying to combat this together. In France, during the pandemic, it seems to me that there is too much selfishness. There should be a certain degree of respect towards others. Some people have symptoms, yet they go out as usual in crowded places. Here, I feel that the culture is different, and we have a distinct identity."

Christine opposes the Chinese collective mindset to French individualism. Christine draws on the Chinese national habitus, considering that it is most appropriate in such kind of situation. The Chinese collective mindset is taken-for-granted as she considers it to be a commonsense that French people should respect quarantine procedures. The non-respect of these Chinese practices leads Christine to essentially differentiate the French from the Chinese and then, to voice a moral judgment: The French people are selfish and disrespectful, or more explicitly formulated by Rémi: "I don't think they (the French people) are really respecting the lockdown, they do not respect another person's life…". By interpreting French behavior through the lens of national culture, Chinese students engaged in a comparative process, oscillating between identification with and/or differentiation from both national contexts, thus allowing them to re-state their national belonging.

Discussion: The first and second phases of the pandemic saw a radical shift in Chinese students' perceptions, from strong support for China's Zero-Covid policy to a growing endorsement of France's more flexible approach. It shows that their support to China's anti-Covid policies mirrored the official government discourses and Chinese medias portrayals of the alleged superiority of Chinese governance over its Western counterparts (Chan & Lee, 2024; 2022; Yang & Chen, 2021). While avoiding direct criticism of Chinese policies or justifying them, students distanced themselves from government narratives as their perception of the virus's threat diminished. These findings align with Binah-Pollak and Yuan's study (2022) on the strong sense of national belonging during the early months of the pandemic, as well as with previous research (Hail 2015; Zhao 2020), suggesting that overseas Chinese express national belonging by maintaining a positive image of China while avoiding negative topics. However, unlike Binah-Pollak and Yuan's study, my research shows a later-stage rejection of Chinese government discourses, highlighting a more dynamic and risk perceptions-dependent construction of national belonging. This divergence may be explained by my study's extended timeframe, which went over the typical endpoint of pandemic studies i.e., June 2020, and captures a more gradual evolution in students' perspectives. Furthermore, my outcomes shed light on how national belonging was also negotiated through perception towards French local population and policies, which has been overlooked in the literature. Therefore, evolving discourses of Chinese students suggest that national belonging was not a static attachment but rather an evolving negotiation influenced by Chinese and French pandemic strategies, risk perceptions and everyday experiences in their host society.

Perceptions of Discrimination as a Negotiation of One's Belonging

The Covid-19 pandemic witnessed the rise of a growing anti-Chinese sentiment coupled with anti-Asian racism in the West. In France, in a survey conducted on ethnically Chinese individuals,

about 33% of the respondents declared having experienced racism between January and September 2020 (Wang et al., 2020). This section focuses on the ways in which Chinese international students perceived and interpreted discrimination in France during the pandemic.

The interview data reflected various attitudes regarding perceptions and experiences of Othering. The overall majority of the participants had difficulties identifying Othering discourses, especially when they were not verbally or physically expressed in an aggressive manner e.g., Louise: "I don't think it was discrimination but…". Among my participants, two categories could be identified: The first group perceived Othered as rooted in their Chinese nationality (meaning, not their race); The second group minimized or downplayed the Othering behavior of French against Chinese individuals.

When talking about discrimination, the term "racism" was strikingly missing from the interviewees' vocabulary. For example, a participant shared an incident that occurred on the streets, when a child pointed out at one of his Chinese friends, labeling her as "Chinese virus". Asking whether this act constituted racism, he contended that it was not, due to the child's age and because the term "Chinese virus" was initially created by the media. Instead, the interviewees who evoked being discriminated against, often in vague terms, articulated their argument in national terms. In other words, they thought being treated differently than others was based on their nationality. When Rémi was rudely approached by a woman in the bus, he hypothesized that her impolite attitude was caused by her prejudice towards China: "Maybe she doesn't like China". Tim explained that he did not have a job because of his nationality:

> "I don't know if this is true or not, but in my opinion, during the pandemic, I think employers preferred to hire locals over foreigners, especially Chinese and Asians… One day, I studied with a friend of mine… She told me: 'There are two reasons why you weren't hired. The first one was that you're Chinese.'"

It is not obvious whether Tim attributes not getting the job due to his race or his nationality. However, his use of the words "locals" and "foreigners" and his emphasis on his friend's explanation about his absence of French citizenship, suggest that he employs the word "Asians" because many people categorize them as Chinese. Besides, the absence of the term racism is another argument to make us think that Tim suggests that his Chinese nationality is the primary reason for the Othering experience he faced.

Another participant, Guillaume, justified the natural dimension of being Othered by White people. While he explained that White people were not having discriminatory attitudes, he also indicated that they tended avoiding interactions with Chinese individuals as a matter of "natural affinities":

> "With White people, most of the time, it's not that they're trying to mess with you, they just avoid interacting with you, you know? In my opinion, this kind of reaction is the least harmful, and it doesn't bother me. It doesn't bother me because some people simply don't like the Chinese, and others just don't feel a natural affinity with us. I get that, everyone has their own preferences, and that's perfectly normal!"

Guillaume acknowledges being perceived as an Other in French society, yet frames this as a normal and rational dynamic rather than an active form of exclusion. He justifies this as there are natural and fixed national differences between the two populations. As such, Guillaume normalizes his status as a foreigner, implicitly reinforcing the idea that full integration into French society is neither expected nor necessarily desired.

On the contrary, five interviewees who described themselves as well-integrated in French society, questioned the extent of discrimination Chinese experienced during the pandemic. For example, Christine believed that there was less anti-Chinese discrimination from the French

during the pandemic, compared to before the crisis, explaining that her French friends were more supportive with her than usual as she could not return to China. She also highlighted that she was well integrated into the French society:

> "Because I have been in France since 2015, it has been 8 years. It has been a long time and I have French friends. I am also working part-time in France and I can naturally engage in conversation with French people."

Her long residency in France, her French friends, her proficiency in French are elements that guarantee her successful integration. Likewise, Fang explains that her experience during the Covid-19 pandemic did not change that much as she has been living in France since more than 7 years. Later in the interview, when asked about if she encountered discrimination in France, she says in a jokingly tone: "There is some news saying that some Chinese were hit by the French (laughs)". By downplaying and/or denying the discrimination that other Chinese may have encountered during the pandemic, Fang and Christine state their proximity with French society. As Skey argues, individuals may adopt cosmopolitan discourses over national ones depending on their perceived level of risk. By downplaying experiences of Othering by the French, my participants assert their successful integration into the host society, minimizing their differences with French people. At a time when anti-Chinese sentiment was at its peak, this strategic positioning allowed them to reduce the risk of being seen as outsiders.

Discussion: In sum, some of my participants acknowledged feeling treated differently by French people, but did not label these experiences as discrimination. Instead, they justified this different treatment as natural because of their Chinese nationality. Liu and Chung (2023, pp. 7–8) reached similar outcomes, noting that their participants interpreted the experienced discrimination as a response to their nationality within the broader context of China-US geopolitical tensions. Gao's study (2023) also strengthen this hypothesis as it emphasizes the importance of situating anti-Chinese discrimination within geopolitical dynamics, arguing that anti-Chinese sentiment is closely linked to disagreements with China over human rights e.g., Uyghurs, Hong Kong, and the Covid-19 crisis e.g., divergent pandemic managements, China's concealment of Covid-19 cases. Beyond geopolitical considerations, my findings also align with the study of Attané et al. (2021) which shows that some ethnically Chinese individuals that present themselves as well-integrated into the French society, tend to downplay acts of discrimination they could have faced as a strategy to re-affirm their proximity with the host society. While I support this interpretation, I extend it by arguing that during heightened times of anti-Chinese sentiment, some Chinese students may find it safer to favor a more cosmopolitan discourse over a national one. Adopting a discourse of a successful integration into French society may mitigate the risks associated with being perceived as Chinese in politically charged moments.

Yet, it seems evident that my nationality modulated the responses of my participants. Being asked his opinion about his experience of discrimination in France, one of my participants, Tim, answered with precaution:

> "Without intending to cause offense, I find Caucasians well-mannered. They are polite. Maybe deep down, they may hold some negative feelings towards Asians, they may not like Asians, but on appearance, at least, they are courteous to Asians, even if they don't like them. No offense, you know!"

Tim assumes that a negative comment towards French people's attitudes may offend me due to my French nationality. In that case, I insisted on my Vietnamese background and international student status in Sweden to make myself appear "less French".

Wearing the Mask as a Chinese National Habitus

From February to June 2020, the French government requisitioned all the stocks and production of chirurgical masks to distribute them to the medical staff in order to face the national shortage. Mask-wearing only became mandatory in closed public spaces in June 2020 (French government, 2021). On the contrary, in China, the population adopted the mask at a very early stage of the pandemic. This section examines how Chinese students perceived the mask as a national marker and thus, a way to negotiate their belonging.

My participants explained that wearing a mask outside the Covid-19 pandemic context is part of the Chinese culture although they were aware that the French people may not perceive it that way. Michael explained that mask-wearing is part of their everyday life in China:

> "For us, we kind of have a tradition to put a mask on, even if we are not ill. In Asia, it's very natural to put a mask on… You know, Asians don't want to get burned, don't want to tan, so people avoid and put the mask on. And sometimes, it's just the morning, we get up late and we don't have time to wash the face, so we just put the mask on and go out to work. It's kind of natural."

Michael emphasizes how mask-wearing has been assimilated into the realm of the commonplace in China. This is a Chinese everyday embodied knowledge i.e., a Chinese national habitus. He emphasizes this by using words like "tradition" and "natural" and by drawing on everyday life examples, such as mask-wearing to prevent getting tanned, to show how face mask-wearing is considered a part of the Chinese national habitus.

In the Covid-19 context, my participants explained me that they had adopted anticipatory protection behaviors such as wearing the mask, based on the recommendations of their family in China and the information gathered through Chinese (social) media from January 2020 onwards. As such, they followed Chinese governmental recommendations, and perceived mask-wearing as a way to fight against the virus. Guillaume explains that wearing a mask is a way to protect him and the others from the Covid-19: "In China, we wear masks to protect ourselves – whether I am sick or not, and also certainly when I am sick. What I mean is I am also protecting you by putting my mask on. There is a dual use." As such, mask-wearing can also be interpreted as a way to support Chinese government's health recommendations, making it a national performance that allow Chinese students to re-affirm their belonging to the Chinese nation.

On the contrary, some of my participants noted concerns that French could relate mask-wearing to being ill or to be identified as an outsider. As a result, they expressed discomfort when wearing mask in public spaces and decided to not protect themselves as a strategy to avoid standing out. Sakula explains this decision:

> "No, I wasn't wearing it (a mask). As I mentioned earlier, French people are not used to wearing masks and if they see you wearing a mask, they will think you're sick, that you have a cold or something like that. So, it's mainly to avoid strange looks that I don't wear a mask."

This decision highlights the tension between performing the Chinese national discourse through embodied practices and adapting to the host country's expectations based on risk perception. On the one hand, mask-wearing is part of the Chinese national habitus but also the reproduction of Chinese national health recommendations. On the other hand, in the early stages of the pandemic, the French population largely perceived masks as a sign of illness, marking the wearer as potentially contagious. At the same time, wearing mask signified an outsider status, as it indicated adherence to a national recommendation other than that of the French government,

which had requisitioned all mask stocks for medical staff. Faced with the risk of being perceived as ill and standing out as an outsider, some participants chose not to wear masks, thereby distancing themselves from the Chinese national discourse.

Discussion: From a historical perspective, Goode and colleagues explain that mask-wearing became part of the Chinese culture in the aftermath of the Manchurian plague in 1910. At this time, the popular rhetoric praised the mask as an "indisputable, photogenic proof of Chinese scientific sovereignty", thus converting Chinese mask-wearers as rational representatives of "hygienic modernity" (Goode et al., 2022, p. 66). This habit was reinforced by the SARS health crisis in 2003 during which mask-wearing was a way to display the fulfillment of one's civic duty (ibid). During the Covid-19 pandemic, in China, the authors argue that face mask-wearing evolved into a more explicit marker of national belonging: "A face mask became part of the uniform of a patriot". In this context, face-mask wearing was not only a health precaution but also a performative act that signified one's allegiance to the nation. This historical perspective strengthens my hypothesis that the decision to wear – or not wear – a mask for Chinese students was a negotiation of their national belonging. Wearing a mask could reaffirm their connection to Chinese culture and/or support to Chinese government' health recommendations, while avoiding it reflected an adaptation to the perceived risk of standing out as an Other. This case illustrates the fluid and context-dependent nature of embodied national practices, shaped by risk perceptions.

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Home, an Underpinned National Logic

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese administration delivered a strong message to its overseas population to stay put in order to prevent further infections. From March 2020 to December 2022, the Five-One policy was implemented according to which international air flights to China could not exceed one flight a week between one Chinese city and one foreign city. The price of the flight ticket soared, becoming unaffordable for people from ordinary backgrounds. In January 2023, Chinese authorities lifted the mandatory quarantine for individuals traveling from abroad and increased the number of international flight connections (French embassy in China, 2023).

When the pandemic hit France, participants proceeded to a comprehensive negotiation for a potential return to China. The parameters of the decision included the importance of completing their study program in France, the financial capacity to buy the plane tickets, the duty to take care of their parents and the restrictions imposed by Chinese migration policies. By the end of June 2020 – which corresponds to the end of the study programs – half of the interviewees went back to China, temporarily or permanently.

As a result of the restrictive Chinese migration policies, Chinese students had limited possibilities to return to China. Five of my interviewees expressed disappointment by the Chinese government. Some even felt rejected by their home country, explaining that China did not do enough for its overseas citizens, as explained by Michael: "It became extremely hard for me to go back. I'd say that at that moment, I kind of felt abandoned by the country... For us, it's really hard, we can't and we got a little bit disappointed." Michael uses a highly emotional register to show the high expectations he has towards his country. The homeland is personified, almost suggesting a filial relation with the country. His exclusion from the Chinese territory resulted into a feeling of abandonment and a strong sense of disorientation which can be read as an indicator of a relatively consistent belonging. This hypothesis seems plausible as later in the interview, Michael proudly claims his Chineseness: "I'm proud of being Chinese… I'm proud of our history and our philosophical thoughts… I'm proud of my own country and my own culture". Although my interviewees did not initially plan to go back to China at this specific time of the year, all of them

experienced the loss of the possibility to return as upsetting. “It’s just that as a student studying abroad, it’s like we always thought it will be easy to go back to China, to get an airplane”, Michael explains. Transnational mobility being taken-for-granted, it highlights how the cosmopolitan experience of studying abroad is conditioned by the ability to return home when needed.

Seven participants mentioned the responsibility of caring for their parents as a parameter in their decision to return to China or stay in France. Being a single child due to the One-child policy, they explained feeling particularly responsible for supporting their parents during these hard times. “For the ones born in the 1980-1990s, we are facing a dilemma on this matter because we are an only child. If we are not returning, no one will take care of our parents”, Lisa explains. By making such a general statement, Lisa implies that taking care of her family is part of the Chinese national habitus. Rémi confirms that taking care of one’s family is part of the Chinese culture:

> “For Chinese traditional culture, it’s best to stay with my parents and grand-parents… In fact, regardless of the job or the country of study, all Chinese parents want their child to return to China. They prefer that their children support them. This is Chinese traditional culture.”

Family is a core component of Chinese culture and thus Chinese national discourse. Expressing the importance of taking care of their family is a way to perform their ‘Chineseness’ and re-assert the importance given to Chinese normative practice. Accordingly, family understood as a national variable, influenced participants’ migratory choice during the pandemic. Nevertheless, Tim explained that this practice does not necessarily affect participants in an even way as it may vary based on one’s gender. According to him, many of his female friends were asked by their family to return to China during the pandemic while the same was not true for his male friends.

While living abroad may be underpinned by the possibility to come back home when needed, here is examined how home is articulated in national terms. Six students expressed feelings of being at home in both France and China. Thirteen out of my 15 participants ultimately associated home with the presence of their family and/or the Chinese culture. After completing his Bachelor program, Alex explained why he went back to China in June 2020:

> “China is my home, it will never be France. Even though I am living here since 2016, I have French friends, I am going out with French friends, I am doing parties, I always feel that my home is still China, not here.
> - Interviewer: What are you missing here?
> - Alex: In France, I’d say the family and the culture.
> - Interviewer: You feel you don’t have French culture?
> - Alex: No (laughs).
> - Interviewer: Why?
> - Alex: How can I put it? It’s really strange. Imagine, you live 6 years in China but you will always be French. You are not Chinese. Even if you have friends, you will always want to go back.”

Alex’s idea of home is defined by the presence of the Chinese culture and family, which are core elements of the Chinese national discourse, as argued earlier. He describes home as a base to always return to and which functions as an emotional anchor. Similarly, Guillaume’s idea of home is closely linked to the presence of his parents:

> “I believe there is also a psychological aspect because once again, I am all alone here, I am a foreigner, I don’t have anyone… even though I have my boyfriend, there is no one more reliable than parents. In such uncertain situations, that’s

> certain that we seek security, we are looking for certainty and only parents can provide that."

According to Guillaume, his lack of network combined with his status of outsider contribute to a sense of insecurity which is reinforced in crisis times such as during the Covid-19 pandemic. His idea of home refers to a psychological anchor that provides him safety and stability in a world of uncertainty, a place that he can withdraw to and where a sense of control is provided.

Discussion: My findings suggest that migration aspirations were articulated through bottom-up national discourses emphasizing the importance of home, family and Chinese cultural values for Chinese students. In contrast, the study by Ma et al. (2023) presents different findings regarding the migration aspirations of Chinese students during the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their research, focusing on the period from April to June 2020, highlights how voluntary immobility was shaped by top-down national discourses from the Chinese government. This divergence may be attributed to differences in the timeframe of each study. As previously argued, Chinese students initially demonstrated strong support for the Chinese government, but this support declined over time, especially after June 2020. Additionally, while Ma and colleagues identify anti-Chinese sentiment as a push-factor for leaving Europe, this was not mentioned by my participants in France. This discrepancy may stem from variations in the Othering experiences of Chinese students in France and across different European countries. However, despite these differences, both studies converge in highlighting a profound sense of disappointment among Chinese students. They felt abandoned and disillusioned by China's restrictive migration return policies during the pandemic, thus indicating a strong sense of national belonging.

Conclusion

This working paper explored how Chinese international students negotiated their national belonging through the (re)production of and/or rejection of Chinese national discourses. The analysis highlighted four key themes through which Chinese students negotiated their national belonging: Supporting or not French and Chinese government's discourses on pandemic management; Perceptions and experiences of Othering; Wearing or not a mask during the early stage of the pandemic; And finally, migration aspirations. The outcomes emphasized on the evolving nature of national belonging, largely shaped by risk and safety perceptions.

The first section illustrated how students initially aligned with Chinese national discourse on Covid-19, supporting the Zero-Covid policy while criticizing French policies as irresponsible, thereby echoing Chinese government and media narratives about the superiority of Chinese governance. In the second stage of the pandemic, they supported the flexibility of the French anti-Covid-19 strategy while refraining from criticizing China's strict policies – sometimes even justifying them. This highlighted how Chinese national belonging is performed through the support to Chinese government and the desire to present a positive image of their country abroad. The shift from full alignment with Chinese national discourses to a more cosmopolitan discourse underscored how their support for certain policies was shaped by their personal risk assessments e.g., availability of the anti-Covid-19 vaccines.

The second section focused on participants' perceptions and experiences of Othering in France. While some acknowledged the existence of discrimination, they did not interpret it as racism but rather as anti-Chinese. They interpreted the experienced discrimination through a national lens, leading them to re-assert their national belonging. However, these perceptions varied based on the length of their stay in France. Long-term residents were more likely to downplay discrimination, seeking to distance themselves from an outsider status and highlighting their successful integration into French society. Adopting a less overtly national discourse may

serve as a strategy to reduce the risk to being perceived as the Chinese Other during periods of heightened anti-Chinese sentiment.

The third section emphasized that mask-wearing is both a practice of the Chinese national habitus but also a way to support Chinese governments' health recommendations. Then, the reproduction of this national discourse was a way to re-assert their Chinese belonging. However, in order to avoid the risk to stand out – as ill or as the Chinese Other – some participants chose not to wear a mask.

The last section highlighted how key aspects of the Chinese national discourse such as home, family, and culture, influenced Chinese students' desire to return to China. The temporary socio-spatial exclusion of my participants from China provoked a sense of abandonment, indicating their strong connection to their homeland. Some participants were unsettled by the unexpected forced immobility, highlighting that their stay in France was conditioned by the possibility of returning home. For them, "home" was defined by the presence of family and Chinese culture, and served as a psychological anchor that provides a feeling of sense of safety, especially in crisis times.

This paper contributed to the growing body of literature on the experience of Chinese students overseas, offering new evidence on the importance of national belonging for Chinese students. More generally, it illustrated the importance of national belonging for people in times of crisis, and their tendency to seek ontological security on the national level during global crises. It also gave new insights into how national discourses can be rejected in favor of a cosmopolitan discourse, depending on the risk perceptions of people. Recommendations for future research include exploring the negotiation of Chinese belonging in a post-pandemic European context, given that the a new type of emigration of the Chinese youth to Europe has been interpreted as a political reaction to China's authoritarianism during the Coivd-19 pandemic (Plümmer, 2023; Xiang, 2023).

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