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Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 283 pp.

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# Wang Simeng, *Illusions et souffrances: Les migrants chinois à Paris* (Illusions and suffering: Chinese migrants in Paris),

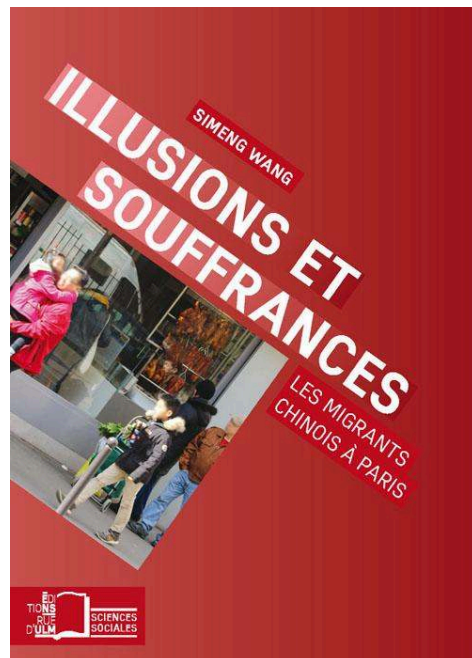
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1 Rare is an academic work that can be devoured in one sitting like a novel. *Illusions et souffrances: Les migrants chinois à Paris* is one such book. The author, Wang Simeng, is a sociologist in charge of research at CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) and member of the Centre de recherche médecine, sciences, santé mentale, société (CNRS-INSERM-EHESS-Université Paris Descartes).

2 Among the oldest in Europe, the Chinese diaspora in France traces back to the early twentieth century<sup>1</sup> with the arrival of Chinese workers during World War I<sup>2</sup> and student-workers until the mid-1920s.<sup>3</sup> The characteristics, economic activities, and socio-cultural practices of Chinese communities have figured in a number of studies,<sup>4</sup> reflecting the changes within this diaspora, long seen as close-knit, industrious, and discreet, but which early this decade began raising its voice during demonstrations to affirm its existence and demand its rights.<sup>5</sup>



- 3 Far from the din and dust of marches and rallies by Chinese people and French citizens of Chinese origin, Wang Simeng unveils a little known aspect of Chinese immigration in France, which behind the scenes consists of bitter illusions and mental distress. Wang's book, the fruit of four years of ethnographic study in Paris and nearby suburbs conducted in pursuance of a doctoral thesis, "outlines a socio-genesis of Chinese migrants' suffering, starting with their social characteristics, conditions of existence, and recent changes among a people in the throes of transformation" (p. 163). Combining migration and mental well-being is not quite an original approach, as Wang says in the introduction: it is in line with that of Abdelmalek Sayad, a sociologist and former director of research at CNRS whose studies on Algerian emigration and immigration were synthesized in his 1999 work *La Double absence. Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*.<sup>6</sup> No doubt Wang is echoing Sayad by using the terms illusions and suffering in her book title.
- 4 The book's six chapters cover several causes and consequences of the illusions and suffering of Chinese migrants in Paris and nearby suburbs. Chapter 1, "De la Chine vers la France" (From China to France), notes different contexts of emigrations and conditions of immigrations, drawing a succinct picture of the capital region's Chinese population. From Chapter 2, "Les souffrances de l'exil" (Suffering of exile), the book gathers pace, with extracts of interviews enjoying prominence and Sayad favouring first-person accounts to expose the diverse trajectories of individuals. Chapter 3 examines the deep changes in matrimonial norms in the transnational context. "Les désillusions de la migration clandestine" (Disillusionment of clandestine migration), Chapter 4's title, highlights the chasm between collective self-deceit over the "French dream" and the bitter reality of life as undocumented migrants. Chapters 5 and 6—the last two—contain the most touching revelations about "Enfants abandonnés, enfants sacrifiés" (Abandoned and sacrificed children) who are brought to France some years after their parents' situation has stabilised. Children who grew up in China far from their parents arrive in the metropolis after a gruelling or even traumatising trip through clandestine immigration networks to find that instead of giving them the love and affection they missed over years of separation, their parents demand that they fulfil "family obligations," making them contribute to the family's economic support by helping the parents in their work and serve as administrative resources in the hope of facilitating the family's regularisation. While some manage to evade family obligations through social climbing and matrimonial strategies, others seek refuge in structures of psychiatric help "to be at peace."
- 5 Readers of this ethnographic account will no doubt gain a different view of the Chinese they meet in Paris. While members of the Chinese diaspora are entering many new professions, from vendors to transnational entrepreneurs, lawyers, and other distinguished socio-professional categories, Wang's book shows the hidden face of immigration and exile, which is not always crowned with achievement and success: far from it.

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NOTES

1. Yu-Sion Live, "Les Chinois de Paris depuis le début du siècle: présence urbaine et activités économiques" (The Chinese in Paris since the early twentieth century: Urban presence and economic activities), *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* (European journal of international migrations), vol. 8, no. 3, 1992, pp. 155-173.
2. Lin Ma (ed.), *Les Travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale* (Chinese workers in France during World War I), Paris, CNRS Editions, 2012.
3. Nora Wang, *Émigration et Politique. Les étudiants-ouvriers chinois en France 1919-1925* (Emigration and Politics. Chinese student-workers in France 1919-1925), Paris, Les Indes Savantes, 2002.
4. Michèle Guillon, Isabelle Taboada-Leonetti, *Le Triangle de Choisy. Un quartier chinois à Paris. Cohabitation pluriethnique. Territorialisation communautaire et phénomènes minoritaires* (Choisy Triangle, a Chinese area in Paris: Multi-ethnic cohabitation, community territorialisation, and minority phenomena), Paris, CIEMI/L'Harmattan, 1986; Jean-Pierre Hassoun, Vinh Phong Tan, "Les Chinois de Paris. Minorité culturelle ou constellation ethnique" (Chinese in Paris: Cultural minority or ethnic constellation), *Terrain* (Carnets du patrimoine ethnologique -Ethnological heritage notes), no. 7, 1986, pp. 34-44 ; Yu-Sion Live, *La Diaspora chinoise en France: immigration, activités économiques, pratiques socioculturelles* (Chinese diaspora in France: Immigration, economic activities, and sociocultural practices), Thèse de doctorat en sociologie (Sociology PhD thesis), (2 vols), Paris, EHESS, 1991; Emmanuel Ma Mung, "Le commerce des Chinois à Paris: renforcement et diversification" (Chinese trade in Paris: Strengthening and diversification), in N. Vaudour and A. Metton (eds.), *L'évolution commerciale des villes françaises* (Commercial changes in French cities), Paris, Presses de l'Institut d'études politiques, 1991; Jean-Pierre Hassoun: "Pratiques religieuses et entreprises chinoises à Paris. Un paysage favorable" (Religious practices and Chinese businesses in Paris: A favourable terrain), *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* (European journal of international migrations), vol. 8, no. 3, 1992, pp. 139-154.
5. Ya-Han Chuang, "La colère du *middleman* : quand la communauté chinoise se manifeste" (Middleman's anger: When the Chinese community protests), *Mouvements*, 92 (4), 2017, pp 157-168; Ya-Han Chuang, "Aubervilliers sur Wenzhou, ou la transformation du Grand Paris par les entrepreneurs chinois" (Aubervilliers on Wenzhou or the transformation of greater Paris by Chinese entrepreneurs), *Revue Hommes et migrations* (People and migrations journal), no. 1320, January-March 2018.
6. Abdelmayek SAYAD, *La Double absence. Des illusions de l'immigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Paris, Seuil, 1999. Available in English as Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (preface by Pierre Bourdieu; translated by David Macey), Cambridge, UK Polity Press; Oxford, UK, Blackwell, 2004, xvii, 340 pages.

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