

CHARLES UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Institute of Sociological Studies

Bachelor's thesis

2024

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**Invisible Poverty: Understanding of
Consumption Strategies among Chinese
Migrants in Europe**

Bachelor's thesis

Prague 2024

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Academic Year: 2023/2024

Bibliographic note

Ji, Kongyang. *Invisible Poverty: Understanding of Consumption Strategies among Chinese Migrants in Europe*. 31 pages. Bachelor's thesis. Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Sociological Studies. Supervisor: doc. Mgr. Martin Hájek, Ph.D.

Abstract

Human's social behaviour has changed throughout history after the emergence of society. Today our market has grown into a developed as well as complicated system. Meanwhile, we are witnessing the largest Chinese immigration wave since World War II. This study dedicates to take an in-depth view into the nuanced interplay between economic realities, cultural influences and personal aspirations that shaped the Disguise Consumption Strategies. In order to conduct the study, semi-structured interviews were done among 5 participants. The findings of the study help to build a deeper understanding of the unique experiences and coping mechanisms by the Chinese immigrants in Europe. The results suggest multiple layers of meaning including the complexities surrounding poverty, acculturation in cross cultural contexts, and consumption patterns.

Abstrakt

Sociální chování člověka se po vzniku společnosti v průběhu dějin měnilo. Dnes se náš trh rozrostl v rozvinutý a složitý systém. Mezitím jsme svědky největší čínské imigrační vlny od druhé světové války. Tato studie se věnuje hloubkovému pohledu na nuance vzájemného působení ekonomické reality, kulturních vlivů a osobních aspirací, které utvářely maskovací spotřební strategie. Za účelem provedení studie byly provedeny polostrukturované rozhovory s pěti účastníky. Výsledky studie pomáhají vytvořit hlubší představu o jedinečných zkušenostech a mechanismech vyrovnávání se čínských

přistěhovalců v Evropě. Výsledky naznačují více významových vrstev včetně složitostí týkajících se chudoby, akulturace v mezikulturním kontextu a spotřebních vzorců.

Keywords

Urbanisation, Income Gap, Social stratification, Comparative study, Disguise Poverty

Klíčová slova

Urbanizace, Rozdíl v příjmech, Sociální stratifikace, Srovnávací studie, Kamufláž chudoby

Extent of thesis: 49236

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague ... **10.07.2024**

Kongyang Ji

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kongyang Ji' written in a cursive style.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Doc. Mgr. Martin Hájek, Ph.D., for his invaluable guidance and unwavering support. His profound knowledge and critical observations together with continuous encouragement have been instrumental in shaping this thesis and fostering my academic growth. Also all participants, my family and friends who generously shared their experiences and support with me, I would like to extend my thanks to them as well. Their support means a lot to me during this period. Without them this thesis would not have been possible.

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Introduction

Poverty is a pervasive and complex issue that affects millions of people for thousands of years. While the outer appearance of poverty, such as wearing cheap clothes or not being able to purchase daily necessities are often easy to observe, the subtle concealed coping mechanisms employed by the poor to navigate their circumstances remain largely hidden from public view. This study aims to shed light on the “invisible poverty” experienced by individuals who migrated from China to European countries mainly, focusing specifically on the disguise consumption strategies they adopt or they observe from other members of the migrants surrounding.

Existing research on poverty has often emphasised the material deprivation or social marginalisation faced by the poor (Desmond, 2016). However, the psychological and social dimensions of poverty together with the stigma and shame associated with the poor have received relatively less attention (Shildrick & Rucell, 2015). In some cases, the poor are forced to use strategies to cover their actual living status to avoid social exclusion.

The disguise strategies used may include purchasing discounted or secondhand luxuries. Others may utilise social networks or public policies to be aimed through welfare or social benefits (Halpern-Meeke et al., 2015). By understanding the nuances of these mechanisms, we can gain a deeper understanding of the resilience and resourcefulness of individuals living in poverty or those around them who can observe the phenomenon. This can benefit later social research as well as policy making agendas.

The findings of this study may help develop a better policy of poverty alleviation via addressing their actual living conditions. We may also build a deeper understanding on the changes of perspectives on moving to a country with a different economic system and cultural background.

1. Literature review

In the following sessions, terms, concepts and theories used in this research will be explained in detail.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon several key theoretical concepts to provide a better understanding of the consumption strategies used by Chinese immigrants in Europe. The theories used in this study will provide conceptual and analytical perspectives for this research, which makes it possible to interpret the object of study. Meanwhile using existing academic works can situate research in the context of existing knowledge. This helps the researcher to better position their contributions.

The motivations behind disguise consumption strategies align with Thorstein Veblen's seminal theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). According to Veblen, people engage in consumption to show off their wealth and social standing. The interviewees eagerness to be part of circles and display an image of prosperity by purchasing luxury items reflects Veblen's theories. Corroborating this view, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests that consumption practices can serve as markers of social class and distinction (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu introduced that there are three types of capital, which are economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Cultural capital can be then divided into embodied capital; objectified capital; and institutionalised capital. Bourdieu posits that there are three primary forms of capital: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Cultural capital, which is particularly relevant for this study, can be subdivided into three forms: Embodied, Objectified, and Institutionalised Cultural Capital. Embodied capital usually refers to long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body. It encompasses the skills, tastes and knowledge that individuals acquire over time, often through socialisation and education. For Chinese immigrants, this can be observed through cultural and linguistic proficiency. Chinese immigrants, especially students, can make their identity more outstanding via showing their skills in language and cooking to the locals or people from other countries; Objectified cultural capital is more like represented by material objects instead of concepts or skills. In the context of consumption strategies, the

ownership of luxury goods, even counterfeit ones, can serve as a visible sign of cultural capital. This is not only limited to economic wealth, but also an appreciation for certain cultural symbols associated with higher social status; Institutionalised cultural capital is founded by academic qualifications and credentials. Chinese people believe that these qualifications enhance their social standing and facilitate upward mobility, which is also a popular opinion among east asian countries.

According to Bourdieu, the accumulation of different forms of capital — economic, social and cultural — can enhance an individual's social status. Cultural capital, in particular, manifests through education, manners, tastes, and possessions that signify one's position within a social hierarchy. In this context, the consumption strategies employed by the interviewees can be understood as attempts to acquire and display cultural capital. For example, buying fake luxury goods can be seen as an effort to objectify cultural capital. Although they may not be real products, they still convey a semblance of economic wealth and an appreciation for the cultural symbols associated with affluence. Posting these content, such as photos with oneself wearing these products may also be taken as an embodiment of cultural capital. Thus, these behaviours are not merely acts of economic expenditure but are deeply entwined with the pursuit of social distinction and the desire to signal belonging to higher social strata.

The concept of Impression Management (Goffman, 1959) suggests that individuals strategically present themselves to others in a manner that aligns with their desired identities. The impression people “give” refers to the intentional and controlled presentation of oneself. It encompasses the deliberate actions and behaviours that individuals employ to convey a specific image to others. These are mostly conscious efforts to project a favourable image that aligns with their aspirational identities and social goals. The impression people “give off” is, however, more likely to be understood as the unintended and often unconscious cues that others pick up on. For example, body language and facial expressions can give off impressions that might contradict the carefully curated image a person tries to present. People engage in various forms of self-presentation to control how they are perceived by others, often to achieve social approval or higher social standing. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of social media, where curated portrayals of oneself can significantly impact perceived identity and social status. Studies on social media have already indicated how self-presentation can affect real-life identity (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Further discussions have shown that the notion of Extended Self has relations with what we have found, wherein individuals incorporate possessions and consumption practices into their self-concept (Belk, 1988). The products we buy and the services we use are in fact a part of our self-extension, whereas except those daily needs (water, food, electricity, etc.), what we buy reflects our personal will. As we may have heard from Russell Belk: *Our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities* (Belk, 1988: 139). The individuals' willingness to sacrifice significant financial resources to maintain a façade of wealth underscores the importance of possessions and consumptions. This is ought to shape their self-perceptions and social identities. We may also understand it by imaging individuals striving to reach congruence between their actual and ideal selves through various means, together with consumption.

The interviews we conducted shed light on the influence of maintaining a façade through spending habits echoing previous studies linking possessions. This also links with visible consumption and happiness. We can see from previous studies (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002) indicating that materialism does not have to have a negative impact on people. Although the negative correlation between happiness and consumption may seem obvious, studies also suggest that materialism can have impacts on both sides. According to Hudders and Pandelaere, everyone has a materialistic tendency to vary from strong to weak. (Hudders & Pandelaere 2012) The consequences rely on the motivation behind it. When the purpose of earning money is to seek power or show off, the negative correlation will disappear. Some interviewees shared the discrepancy between the personas and the inner struggles hints at a potential toll on mental well-being in pursuit of an image of wealth. Previous study revealed that materialism may help raise happiness in a short period of time, but it may not seem so in a long term (Drakopoulos, 2008). Chasing goals like money and status can erode drive and happiness.

Additionally, these findings align with research on feeling deprived relative to others indicating that people feel distress when they believe they are at a disadvantage compared to peers. Chinese immigrants living in Europe using such disguise consumption strategies may be trying to combat the feelings of deprivation by projecting an aura of prosperity potentially leading to strain and unhealthy coping methods.

We now switch our angle to the cultural context part. Chinese immigrant experience in Europe is also a significant part to study in our research. As introduced above, the concept of Face (面子) encompasses social status and prestige. This may contribute to the motivation underlying disguise consumption strategies. The need to preserve or enhance one's face through conspicuous consumption resonates with this concept, therefore could be taken as one of the factors that influence motivation. The process of acculturation involving the adaptation of immigrants may also play a role in shaping these strategies. Some interviewers mentioned that some of them aim to emulate the patterns of their European counterparts which may potentially lead to a clash between their cultural values and the perceived norms of the host society. This kind of tension may lead to the adoption of camouflage strategies as a means of navigating the acculturation process. Achieving a sense of belonging may be realised through getting tight connections with fellow Chinese, but can also through this behaviour (Ryder, A G et al, 2000). Previous studies have given suggestions which posits that immigrants can maintain their heritage culture while simultaneously adopting aspects of the host culture. Although the history of Chinese living in Europe may not be long, the American research results have high value to refer to.

1.2 Migrant Perspectives on Consumption Strategies

Existing research on consumption behaviour provides valuable insights into how they may perceive and engage in such a process. Special cultural concepts such as “face-saving” (面子) are key factors that influence migrants' mental status even if they have moved out of their original place of their background. Immigration cities such as Toronto is one of the best examples, where members of local Chinese immigration communities may avoid social stigma by purchasing discounted products, etc (Wang & Lo, 2007). They can maintain their social status in order to get more resources such as social connections.

Furthermore, the migration experience itself can affect their perspectives as well. Since China has undergone a transformation from a planned economic system to a more capitalist-oriented economy (Li 2008), the gap between the rich and poor has grown as well, leading to unavoidable income inequality. Poor people were once claimed to be

“the owner of the nation” (人民是国家的主人), but now they have to face the fact that people’s attitudes towards wealth and social status has changed.

1.3 Defining Poverty and Wealth among Chinese Migrants

The different way Chinese migrants define poverty and wealth may be extremely influential to their consumption behaviours. For those who grew up under the influence of Chinese culture, the notion of poverty and wealth is often closely connected to social status, family reputation and the ability to maintain a certain standard of living. However, as mentioned above, they may also view poverty from a social and psychological consequences perspective.

Though, Chinese migrants may have a different view of poverty from its materialistic aspect. It can be seen as a lack of social and psychological consequences that arise when one is identified as being poor rather than those hardships that come with it. The stigma attached to poverty will make the migrants put more attention on looking rich than what you think about their financial status for themselves. And this leads to disguise consumption by the migrants in order to hide their struggles and present an image of prosperity (Zhu et al., 2022). This concept is also applicable to all genders and age groups. Consequently, research has been conducted showing that male students often do this more frequently than female students in terms of interpersonal mediation and ostentation.

1.4 Disguise Consumption and Impression Management

The exploration of customer psychology has garnered significant attention recently. In particular, scholars have focused on the understanding of how individuals utilise consumption patterns to navigate social and economic landscapes. The concept of this disguise consumption (Berger & Heath, 2007) refers to the strategic use of consumption to conceal or project a desired socioeconomic status. Scholars draw parallels to the strategic use of consumption to conceal or project a desired socioeconomic status. This behaviour is considerably relevant among migrant communities, where the need to blend in or stand out could be amplified due to various social pressures and economic constraints. In summary, disguise consumption is similar to the concept of shedding

light on the strategic use of consumption to conceal or project a desired socioeconomic status.

The theoretical underpinning for the notion of disguise consumption could be found in Goffman's seminal work "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (Goffman, 1959). Goffman posits that individuals engage in impression management in order to present themselves and their actions to others in a manner that aligns with desired perceptions or identities. This provides us a foundational framework for understanding their behaviours through the lens of impression management. Goffman describes this as a dramaturgical metaphor likens social interactions to theatrical performances. This is due to the fact that individuals tend to carefully curate and manage the impressions they convey to their audience. In the context of migration, this metaphor is particularly salient, as migrants often navigate dual identities and must manage how they are perceived both within their communities and by the broader society. Meanwhile, Goffman introduces the concepts of "front stage" and "back stage" in social performances. On the front stage, individuals perform roles in public settings, adhering to societal expectations and norms to maintain a certain image. Conversely, the back stage represents private settings where individuals can relax and be themselves without the pressure of societal scrutiny. For Chinese migrants in Europe, the dichotomy between front stage and back stage is pronounced. In public, they may adopt behaviours and consumption patterns that align with their desired social status or cultural assimilation goals. In private, however, their behaviours may reflect their true preferences and cultural heritage, free from the performative pressures of public scrutiny.

The "face-saving"(面子) is very alike with Goffman's idea. Building on Goffman's insights, subsequent literature has explored the interplay between consumption, identity construction and impression management in various contexts (Ustuner & Holt, 2007). These existing studies help the researcher to study various strategies in different backgrounds. The cultural concept of "face" (面子) in Chinese society, which emphasises maintaining dignity and social standing, parallels Goffman's idea of impression management. The desire to save face can drive Chinese migrants to engage in camouflage consumption, using strategic purchasing and presentation choices to maintain or enhance their social status. This behaviour is not merely about economic

capability but also about managing perceptions and sustaining a respectable image within both the migrant community and the host society.

We delved into the interplay between consumption, identity construction and impression management in various contexts based on Goffman's insights. We also built our perspectives based on the paper we discussed above, that is how consumption practices can serve as a means of identity construction and status signalling among different social groups. In the context of migration, the concept of disguise consumption extends beyond mere economic activity. It encompasses a broader range of behaviours and strategies aimed at managing social perceptions and maintaining a desired self-image. Migrants often face unique challenges that necessitate strategic consumption choices, such as the need to integrate into the host society while preserving their cultural identity, or the pressure to demonstrate economic success despite facing financial hardships.

Moreover, we cannot ignore the influence of social networks and community dynamics in shaping consumption strategies. Especially for Chinese migrants in Europe, social networks, take Chinese communities as example, play a crucial role in providing support and influencing consumption behaviours. The members in these communities have impacts on each other, meaning that some environments where certain consumption patterns may occur, being encouraged or deemed necessary to maintain social cohesion and respectability within the community. This collective influence can lead to the adoption of disguise consumption strategies. Community members who are influenced by these patterns may adjust their behaviour to adapt the expectations and norms within or outside the community.

The study of disguise consumption will make us aware that it is essential to recognise that these migrants are not merely passive recipients of societal pressures but active agents who strategically navigate their social environments. By using the theoretical frameworks developed by Goffman and subsequent scholars, we can gain a more professional understanding of the motivations and strategies behind their consumption behaviour, which is the key point of this study.

1.5 Economic System Transitions and Consumer Culture

Before contextualising the experiences of Chinese migrants, we have to understand the differences between Western Countries' economic system and Chinese's, especially the shift from socialism to capitalism, on consumer attitudes and behaviours.

During 1949 to 1976, China was undergoing a strict planned economic system. Consumption was largely characterised by scarcity, rationing and a focus on meeting basic needs. Consumer goods were limited, as individual expression through consumption was restricted. However, with the emergence of economic reforms and opening up policy (改革开放), together with the gradual embrace of capitalist principles, China has witnessed a so-called burgeoning consumer culture. Chinese who insist on the socialist way of life call it “走资” (capitalist roader) and are strongly against it. This introduced the gap between different generations amongst Chinese citizens. What is undeniable is that this historic event reshaped the consumption landscapes within China, meanwhile it also had profound implications for Chinese individuals who have migrated to other countries (Croll, 2007). Those who were born during the period of 1976 and 1999 are significantly influenced by such phenomena. For some migrants, this transition may manifest in a heightened desire for material possessions and a tendency towards conspicuous consumption. The reasons may be a means of asserting their social status and so on. Younger generations who have been familiar with western style of life can find it easy to adapt, but others may feel conflicted, navigating the tensions between their traditional cultural values.

To explain the economic reform in detail, the reform and opening-up policy (改革开放) marked a gradual shift from a highly centralised planned economy towards a socialist market economy system. The reform measures implemented were multifaceted and wide-ranging. In the rural areas, the introduction of the household responsibility system (家庭联产承包责任制) allowed peasants to operate their own plots and retain surplus production, effectively collectivising agriculture. In urban areas, price controls were relaxed, paving the way for the development of a market-oriented economy with diverse economic components coexisting (Naughton, 2007). Furthermore, China opened its doors to foreign investment, technology, and management expertise, fostering economic integration and exchange with the global market. This process culminated in the establishment of a socialist market economy system. With the government

transitioning from being the primary economic actor to a regulatory and supervisory role (Naughton, 2007). The reform measures facilitated the acceleration of marketisation and modernisation processes within the Chinese economy. As a result, individual consumption levels and living standards experienced significant improvements. The challenges come with the benefits simultaneously. Income disparities among the population widened, materialistic, consumerist values gained prominence. This shift in system reshaped the consumer culture within China, but its impact extended beyond national borders, influencing the consumption attitudes and behaviours of Chinese migrants abroad. As they negotiate their new environments, their patterns of consumption are likely shaped by the interplay between their traditional ideologies and the lingering influences of China's economic reform era. Understanding this complex dynamic is crucial for unravelling the nuances hidden inside their logics.

Furthermore the reform policy played a role in changing perceptions of poverty and wealth. In the past many young people aspired to work in factories. This shift reflects a change from principles towards an acknowledgment of social class differences and the desire for success. During that time Chinese propaganda posters often featured slogans, like "Combatting the bourgeoisie and supporting the revolution." However these slogans started disappearing between 1978 and 1989.

1.6 China's Contemporary Consumer Market and Consumer Psychology

As introduced above, China's consumer market has experienced remarkable growth with the emergence of reform and open-up policy, accompanied by profound shifts in consumer psychology. Researchers widely acknowledge a heightened tendency towards individualism and materialism among contemporary Chinese consumers (Croll, 2007).

Moreover, with the development of Chinese internet companies, online-shopping has grown rapidly throughout the 21st century. Companies like Taobao, JD.com and Pinduoduo have won major seats in nowadays internet company ranking along with Amazon and Yahoo. The proliferation of the internet therefore fostered greater diversity in personal values and aesthetic preferences. Consumers have exhibited a growing pursuit of self-actualisation or emotional experiences. Consequently, modern marketing strategies often focus on stimulating consumer imagination towards so-called lifestyles.

Understanding the development track of the Chinese economy helps us build a holistic awareness of the psychology behind Chinese consumers' behaviour. It is essential to unravel the strategies employed by Chinese migrants.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This research study uses a research approach that involves conducting semi-structured interviews to delve into how Chinese immigrants and migrants in Europe perceive and engage with wealth and poverty. Opting for structured interviews is in line with the intricate nature of the research topic steering away from providing definitive answers. The goal of this method is to gain an understanding and insights into the consumer viewpoints within the community in Europe paving the way for potential future advancements. By adopting this approach we can develop an understanding of participants perspectives, experiences and motivations.

Employing a semi-structured interview format strikes a balance between standardisation and flexibility. It allows researchers to address predetermined topics while giving participants room to expand on their experiences and insights. This method proves effective in uncovering nuances in participants' behaviours without delving into questions that may be too academic or professional and make participants uneasy.

Our research will mainly focus on extending the existing body of knowledge by delving deeper into the specific context of Chinese migrant communities in Europe. We have designed a specific questionnaire for the interview in order to obtain direct and trustworthy information from Chinese migrants in Europe, which guarantees that the information we gathered is up-to-date. Through textual analysis and qualitative analysis, researchers seek to uncover the nuanced ways in which these migrants engage in disguise consumption and manage their social impressions. By examining the interview

results, we can shed light on the broader implications of these behaviours for their social integration and identity construction.

2.2. Research Questions

The research questionnaire include the following parts:

1. How do Chinese migrants in Europe define and conceptualise poverty and wealth, and how have these perceptions changed or remained stable since their migration?
2. What consumption strategies do Chinese migrants employ to navigate their financial circumstances and maintain a desired social status?
3. What role does life philosophy, cultural identity, and the pursuit of happiness play in shaping the consumption decisions and strategies of Chinese migrants in Europe?

This inquiry acknowledges the impact of cultural influences on consumer behaviours. It aims to explore how immigrants' interpretations of happiness, satisfaction and their efforts to preserve identity intersect with their financial choices in their adopted countries. Examining these inquiries, which include viewpoints on subjects as well as philosophy, will aid in enhancing comprehension of the intricate interplay among diverse circumstances, societal pressures, cultural principles, individual aspirations and more. These are the elements that influence the consumption tactics utilised by immigrants.

The results of this survey will offer insights into the nature of this phenomenon. Guide potential actions or assistance measures customised to the distinct experiences and requirements of this community.

2.3. Participants Selection and Sampling

The study participants in this research are Chinese individuals who migrated to different countries within Europe from varying socio-economic backgrounds, and yet many of them are students or recent graduates.

The inclusion criteria for participants selection were as follows:

1. Chinese nationals who had migrated to and were currently residing in a European country. Educational purposes are preferred.
2. Individuals aged 18 years or above at the time of interview.
3. Representing a range of socioeconomic statuses and family backgrounds prior to migration.

The study aimed to gather a range of viewpoints on poverty, wealth and spending habits by involving participants from socioeconomic backgrounds. Potential participants were found through the researchers' academic connections within student communities at various universities. They were initially contacted through media or introductions from acquaintances, where they received information about the study's goals and what participation entailed.

Interested individuals who met the criteria were given details about the study, including the interview procedures, confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw without repercussions. Five participants from backgrounds were recruited for in depth qualitative interviews allowing for a thorough exploration of their unique perspectives while staying within the study's scope. The basic characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 1.

The one on one semi structured interviews, guided by questions encouraged conversations, between the researcher and participants. This approach enabled participants to share their stories and elaborate on their answers. The flexibility of this method allowed for probing into accounts and emerging themes during the interviews. Although having 5 participants may appear limited the purposive sampling method was chosen to ensure an effective understanding.

Table 1. The basic characteristics of the participants

	Occupation	Education	Nationality	Age
Int. 1	Student	Bachelor	Chinese	20
Int. 2	Employee	Highschool	Sweden	42
Int. 3	Student	Bachelor	Chinese	21
Int. 4	Student	Doctor	Chinese	26
Int. 5	Free-Lancer	Bachelor	France	40s

2.4. Data Collection

To gather the suitable data, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five recruited participants. The interviews were done either on-line or face-to-face, depending on the physical convenience. The interviews were carried out in a format that ensured privacy, comfort and convenience for both researcher and participants.

Prior to the interview officially started, the participants were provided with the detailed aims and objectives of the study. The interviews were conducted in their native language or a language that the participants were most comfortable with, either Mandarin or English. This is to facilitate open expression of their thoughts and experiences. With the consent of the participants, we recorded all the interviews to ensure accurate data capture together with subsequent transcription and analysis. Notes were also taken during the interviews.

The duration of the interviews varied from 10 to 30 minutes approximately. This depends on the depth and breadth of the participants' responses and the emergence of additional relevant topics. Upon completion of the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and translated verbatim using services such as Xunfei and DeepL Translator. We removed or replaced identifying information with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Then transcripts were then reviewed and cross-checked against the audio recordings and written notes to ensure accuracy and completeness. In some cases deep translation service may corrupt the file entirely, where manual check is necessary.

2.5. Data Analysis

With regard to the data analysis, an appropriate method was followed to find valuable information within the collected interviews.

To begin the analysis, the initial stage was known as data familiarisation. The researcher went through the interview transcripts meticulously, immersing in the data and jotting down their first impressions and possible trends or themes.

Thus, from the empirical data we gathered from participants, we are able to analyse and describe the phenomena relevant to our research questions. The initial stage involved thoroughly reading the interview transcripts to immerse in the data. During this phase, we are trying to familiarise the data we gathered and are able to note initial impressions and potential trends. This was crucial for developing a deep understanding of the content and context of the interviews. The next step is to code the data using the open source collaborative qualitative coding package Requal (<https://github.com/RE-QDA/requal/>). Requal facilitated the organisation and categorisation of the data into meaningful segments. The coding process entailed coming up with codes that have connections with the research questions, and then find related sentences within the context. The final stage involved interpreting the themes and patterns identified during the process. We linked the empirical data to theoretical concepts and frameworks. By following this way of analytical method, our study ensured a thorough understanding of the data. This is significantly important for the development of our final section of conclusions.

2.6. Limitations

The research has a lot of limitations that have to be acknowledged. First of all, the sample size of 5 participants may seem insufficient, constraining on the generalisability and transferability of any possible findings. Secondly, an unavoidable inherent challenge is the researcher bias. During the interview, we as the interviewer may make conscious efforts to maintain reflexivity and objectivity, however, completely eliminating the impacts of these is considerably impossible.

Despite having all these disadvantages, we are still encouraged to fulfil the research as it can still gain us a deeper understanding through Chinese immigrants' personal experiences and comments. This helps us to pave the way for later studies to address the identified limitations in the future.

3. Results and Findings

Based on the coded interviews, we are able to organise the analysis part to provide a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' socio-economic situations and coping strategies. I coded the interviews into 8 codes to answer the research questions.

The findings from the interviews highlight that poverty among Chinese immigrants in Europe is often viewed through a moral lens, deeply influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations. Many participants expressed that poverty is not merely about the lack of financial resources but also the inability to uphold social standards and maintain face. As introduced in the background section, in China, poverty has been related with the inability to meet certain societal benchmarks due to some historic and cultural factors. For instance, house ownership, stable employment, family responsibilities. Similar to Goffman's concept, the "face" is crucial, encompassing dignity and social standing. Failing to meet these expectations is often seen as a failure to uphold one's family and personal honour. As pointed out by Interviewee 5:

"In China, if you are still single and renting a house when you're over 30, your family will think you're poor". (Interview 5)

This perception of poverty extends beyond mere economic factors to include social status and the maintenance of the "face". For example, in the coastal province of Fujian, where many of the inhabitants are in other countries for commercial purposes, although they may not live in China for long, their priority is still to build good-looking houses in their original community. This is also reflected in "certificate" and other areas, where parents in China often require their children to get accepted by famous universities. This partly explains why Chinese parents are always seen as "crucial" to their children from the point of view of foreigners. The emphasis on social appearances and maintaining a respectable image plays a significant role in how poverty is understood. The inability to

achieve the obligations of one's own family or society is perceived as a form of poverty. This impacts the individual's social standing, sometimes together with their family's social standing as well. As quoted by one of the interviewees:

"You think you're poor all because you can't hold your head up in front of other people." (Interview 5)

After moving to Europe, these perceptions undergo more or less changes due to different social and economic contexts. The targeted destination of our research, the European countries, generally place less emphasis on the visible markers of wealth and social status compared to Chinese society. This shift allows some migrants to reassess their understanding of poverty and wealth. As mentioned by one of the interviewees:

"Well, I don't know. I used to think that money was the most important thing and that you could have everything if you had it. Now I think the current situation is fine. In what way, well, I don't know... It's possible that the Nordic way of doing things has influenced me." (Interview 2)

Despite this, it does not indicate that they have overall abandoned the traditional values of Chinese culture. The original cultural norms from their home country or region continue to influence their perceptions and behaviours. Some interviewees expressed the feeling that although migration indeed have some limited influence on their value, their main point of view has not been changed significantly:

"I don't think I've been influenced much so far, because I'm a stubborn person, so some of my ideas have remained relatively stable until now. So I don't really accept some of the European values, or even some of the concepts that I don't think I can accept." (Interview 3)

The next important thing we focused on is about their financial circumstances. People who migrated to Europe have different backgrounds, thus their motivation or purpose sometimes differ as well. Chinese migrants often adopt stringent budgeting and prioritisation strategies. They focus on essential expenditures and minimise unnecessary spending to maintain financial stability. As we can see from the quote below:

“Yes. But it's changed a lot since I came to England. I basically don't have anything else to spend my time on other than survival. No entertainment consumption. And then, uh, with this food consumption seen so drastically. It's supposed to be talking about 20,000 a pound at the lowest point. A pound a day to two pounds a day. Hmm. Now, yes. And now it's slowly coming back, because of the part-time jobs, so I've got some of my own going out..”
(Interview 4)

This specific kind of strategy is not rare across the world, but it still reflects the fact that it helps people avoid debt and maintain a basic standard of living, also setting aside funds for occasional social expenses.

Participants also revealed various consumption strategies they employ to navigate their financial constraints while maintaining an acceptable level of social image. This includes cutting budgets, minimising purchasing unnecessary goods, etc. Interviewee 5 pointed out that:

“It's very simple. You need to understand what things you really need right now... Don't get yourself into a loan situation. I hate taking out loans, that scares me and that's what keeps me on my toes.” (Interview 5)

This shows an attitude of a cautious approach to spending. Through this people can emphasise the importance of financial stability over outward displays of wealth. Interviewee 5 once again implies that

“I live very modestly... My money enables me to go out and spend some money with my friends every once in a while.” (Interview 5)

The life philosophy of Chinese migrants influences their decision on purchasing significantly. Some interviewees reported that many migrants adopt a pragmatic approach to focus on a long-term goal rather than a short-term one. This outlook is reflected in their traditional value of cautious spending habits:

“You mean in terms of money transfers? Oooh. It's very simple. You need to understand what things you really need right now. I don't mean things like taxes, car maintenance and utilities. I mean other expenses. For example, before you buy something, you ask yourself, do you really need this thing right now? What if I buy this thing and it affects my ability to pay my regular bills? Don't get yourself into a loan situation. I hate taking out loans, that scares me and that's what keeps me on my toes.” (Interview 5)

This way of life emphasises financial prudence and resilience, guiding their consumption strategies towards sustainability and security. On the other hand, the knowledge of an individual's identity also plays an important role in shaping consumption decisions. It has two sides of influence, one is the driving force of migrants to maintain traditions and social norms, another one is the process of acculturation encourages the adoption of new values and practices from the host society:

“Maintaining and expressing cultural identity is important to me. I still adhere to some traditional Chinese festival customs, cooking Chinese dishes, participating in local Chinese community events, etc. Chinese food and Chinese history are really treasures, and it's a pity that Westerners can only pay attention to Japan and Korea, and their propaganda is very successful. China's propaganda is so poor that people have the impression that China is only a dictatorship, not human rights. If you want me to say, this is not all about China, the current government cannot represent China, and I am still proud that I have Chinese blood..” (Interview 2)

Reaching a balance point of these two influences results in hybrid consumption patterns. This does not only mean to explain the complexity of their consumption strategies, but also represents their cultural heritage and the new social environment they live in.

Last but not least, the pursuit of happiness is also a central theme of personal philosophy that we cannot ignore. In contrast to the often career-centric culture of China, European societies place a higher value on work-life balance and personal well-being. This shift encourages migrants to prioritise experiences and relationships over material possessions. This European social norm has influenced some Chinese

migrants as well. Except from the quoted sentence from the interviewee 2, we are also able to see it from the interviewee 1, that:

“Yes, yes, this has a very obvious, is that I am around someone said they came to Europe is to run out, is in order to be in Europe can lie flat, can not work overtime, do not have to 996, this is a kind of quite, a big module in the life of the people, on the work module of a kind of happiness and sense of satisfaction embodiment of the bar, it should be.” (Interview 1)

Thus, it is not hard for us to tell that the motivation for some Chinese migrants is indeed largely influenced by their quest for a happier life. Meanwhile, this pursuit of happiness leads to changes in consumption behaviour, where the emphasis is placed on meaningful experiences and social connections rather than solely on accumulating wealth or status symbols. This may also reflect on the result of the shift of their value on social status.

The results of our findings provide some valuable insights into the nuanced experiences and coping mechanisms of Chinese migrants in Europe. Their definitions and conceptualizations of poverty and wealth are deeply rooted in their cultural backgrounds but are also influenced by their new social and economic contexts. The factors that have contributed to the shift can be explained by the educational recognition and the change of the way of social networking. To understand the significance of how policymakers and community organisations can help create an environment where immigrants can thrive and contribute meaningfully to their host societies, it is important to understand the significance of this finding.

To sum up, it is a complex environment for Chinese immigrants in Europe for socio-economic integration. Their experiences highlight the challenges and opportunities inherent in migration, providing a roadmap for future research and policy development aimed at fostering inclusive and supportive communities.

4. Discussion

Interviews with immigrants living in Europe uncovered ways they manage their expenses by hiding their financial struggles. They use tactics to mask their situation and show off a wealthier image through visible spending. This section examines the reasons, expressions and consequences of these tactics using quotes, from the interviews.

Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption suggests that individuals purchase and display luxury goods to signal wealth and social status. Purchasing goods that the price does not reflect one's income indicates Veblen's idea that consumption is not only about satisfying one's fundamental needs, but also about showing one's economic power and gaining social recognition. Moreover, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is critical to the consumption strategies among Chinese immigrants in Europe. Bourdieu emphasises that by purchasing luxury goods, individuals strive to embody cultural capital. This enhances their social status within both their ethnic community and, sometimes, broader European society if needed. Goffman's theory shows that participants use consumption strategies to manage the impressions they give to others, aligning their self-presentation with desired social identities. This calls back to Goffman's distinction between the impressions people "give" and "give off". The curated social media portrayals and conspicuous consumption observed among participants exemplify their efforts to construct a desired identity related to affluence. The concept of disguise consumption refers to the strategic use of consumption to conceal or project a desired socioeconomic status. Our study finds that Chinese immigrants employ disguised consumption to navigate their financial constraints while maintaining a respectable social image. The pressure to uphold social standards and avoid the stigma of poverty drives them to engage in behaviours that obscure their true financial situation, resonating with the idea of disguise consumption.

With the results of our study, we are able to contribute a more nuanced understanding of poverty and consumption among Chinese immigrants in Europe. This perspective challenges traditional views of poverty, emphasising the psychological and social dimensions that influence how individuals perceive and respond to their economic circumstances. Last but not least, The research also sheds light on the process of acculturation and how it affects consumption strategies. Chinese immigrants in Europe navigate a complex interplay between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to the norms of the host society. Understanding this dynamic is essential for addressing the

unique challenges faced by immigrants and supporting their integration into new social and economic environments. Although due to the fact that the amount of participants is limited and the ability of the researcher is not enough to do a more wide-ranged study, we do hope that this study's exploratory investigation into the consumption strategies of Chinese immigrants in Europe can yield several meaningful basis for further study.

5. Conclusion

Firstly, the participants exhibited a notable evolution in their knowledge upon poverty and wealth. We witnessed the movement beyond a solely material-centric perspective. Their comprehension expanded to encompass psychological dimensions of identity. The participants exhibited a notable evolution in their understanding of poverty and wealth, moving beyond a solely material-centric perspective to include psychological dimensions of identity. Meanwhile, The participants exhibited a notable evolution in their understanding of poverty and wealth, moving beyond a solely material-centric perspective to include psychological dimensions of identity.

Although disguise consumption may change or provide satisfaction in the short term, they still can potentially exacerbate an individual's mental health on a social level. Chinese immigrants employ these strategies to obscure their real financial circumstances while maintaining a desired social standing, according to Goffman's theory, based on "face".

The pursuit of happiness and life philosophy also influence consumption strategies. In contrast to the career-focused culture in China, the European emphasis on work-life balance and personal well-being encourages migrants to seek a more balanced approach to their financial and social lives. This shift is reflected in their spending habits, where they prioritise experiences and social interactions that contribute to their overall well-being.

Overall, we provide valuable insights into the unique experiences and coping mechanisms of Chinese immigrants in Europe via this study. The findings lay the groundwork for further in-depth analysis and contribute to the development of culturally sensitive policies aimed at supporting immigrant communities. Social comparison,

particularly through social media, also plays a crucial role. Migrants often compare their lifestyles to those of their peers in both China and Europe, which influences their consumption strategies. The pressure to keep up with social norms and portray a successful image on social media platforms can drive them to engage in conspicuous consumption, even if it stretches their financial limits.

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List of appendices

Appendix 1: Research Questionnaire

Appendices

Appendix 1: Research Questionnaire

Invisible Poverty & Wealth - interview scenario

1. [Introduction of the researcher and research]
 - a. I am an undergraduate student of Social Sciences at Charles University and write my bachelor thesis about perception of wealth and poverty in Chinese migrants to Europe.

2. [Obtaining the informed consent]
 - a. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. All responses are confidential and will not be shared with anyone except my supervisor. The purpose of this research is academic and the results will be published in my bachelor thesis. You can refuse answering any questions and leave the interview anytime if you feel uncomfortable. Do you agree?

3. [Introduction of the Interviewee]
 - a. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself, where are you coming from, how did you get in Europe and where do you live now.
 - b. Would you say that you live in a local Chinese community or not?

4. [How do Chinese immigrants define poor and rich - back in China.]

Now, I would like to ask what you remember about wealth and poverty in China. How would you describe your life back in China in terms of wealth or poverty?

 - i. How do you think Chinese people understood poverty back then? Was it normal or something shameful?
 - ii. Did people hide that they were poor? If yes, how did they do it? If not, why?
 - iii. Could you distinguish poor people on the street? What were the indicators or signs of someone's poverty?
 - iv. *Some questions concerning the personal experience with poor people (in the family, friends, relatives, colleagues...)*
 - b. *The same set of questions about wealth...*
 - i. *understanding wealth*
 - ii. *showing off wealth*
 - iii. *recognising rich people, signs of wealth*
 - iv. *personal experience with wealthy people (in the family, friends, relatives, colleagues...)*

5. [How do Chinese immigrants define poor and rich - now in Europe.]
 - a. Has your opinion on poverty and wealth changed since you lived in Europe? If yes, in what ways? If not, why is it so stable?

- b. How do you think Europeans understand poverty?
 - c. *Set of questions on perception of poverty in the respondent's current life - understanding poverty, hiding poverty, recognising poor people, signs of poverty, personal experience with poor people (in the family, friends, relatives, colleagues...)*
 - d. *Set of questions on perception of wealth in the respondent's current life - understanding wealth, showing off wealth, recognising rich people, signs of wealth, personal experience with wealthy people (in the family, friends, relatives, colleagues...)*
6. Let's turn to your economic behaviour.
- a. How has living in a different country and culture affected your economic status or well-being?
 - b. How do you allocate your resources among different needs and wants?
 - c. How do you use or share your wealth or resources with others?
 - d. How do you compare your economic status or well-being with other people, especially those from your country of origin and those from your host country?
7. Now, I would like to explore the differences of poverty and wealth between socialist and capitalist economic systems.
- a. Do you think poverty is the same in both systems?
 - b. Do consumption habits and strategies differ between them?
 - c. How do you adapt or adjust to the changes or trends in the market or society?
 - d. How do you perceive or respond to the social or environmental impacts of your consumer behaviour or preferences? (In this case it could be the Chinese community or just the local society.)
 - e. What are some of the cultural differences or similarities that you have noticed or experienced regarding consumer attitudes? (If answered in a previous similar question then skip.)
 - f. General questions regarding the consumption strategy part upon other people or the community.
8. Lastly, I would like to ask your opinion about, let's say, life philosophy.
- a. What do you think members of the Chinese immigrant community where you live consider to be their definition of happiness and contentment?
 - b. Do you think you have achieved your ideal life today?
 - c. How do you balance your personal and professional goals and aspirations?
 - d. How do you celebrate your achievements and successes?
 - e. How do you compare your happiness and contentment with other people, especially those from your country of origin and those from your host country?
 - f. How has living in a different country and culture affected your happiness and contentment?

- g. What are some of the cultural differences or similarities that you have noticed or experienced regarding happiness and contentment?
- h. How do you maintain and express your cultural identity and values?
- i. To the Chinese immigrant community, what is their definition of contentment or happiness according to your personal view?

9. Is there anything you would like to add?

10. Thanks and goodbye