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CENTER FOR GERMAN STUDIES
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EUROPEAN FORUM AT THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY

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Beyond the Rainbow

**Dual Embeddedness, Diaspora Mobilization, and State Influence:
Chinese Responses to the Carlsen Scandal in Germany**

Final assignment in course

Migration(s) to Germany: Policies, Realities and Perception (54858)

Instructed by Prof. Gisela Dachs

Submitted to Prof. Gisela Dachs

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12 Shvat, 5786 - January 29, 2026

1. Introduction

In June 2020, approximately three months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, a children's book entitled *Ein Corona-Regenbogen für Anna und Moritz* (“A Corona Rainbow for Anna and Moritz”) was published in Hamburg.¹ Written in clear and accessible language, the book explains to its young readers what the COVID-19 virus is, outlines its consequences, and describes which behaviors should be adopted or avoided in order to protect oneself. At the time, early public and scientific discourse had already consolidated the assessment that the outbreak of the virus was linked to a wet market in the city of Wuhan (武汉), China. Accordingly, on page four of the book Moritz explains that “the virus came from China and from there spread across the entire world.”²

This explicit attribution of the pandemic’s origin, however, was not well received by powerful actors. The Chinese Consulate General in Hamburg threatened legal action against the long-established publishing house Carlsen on the grounds of incitement to racism, and demanded a public apology as well as the withdrawal of the edition from circulation. At the same time, members of the Chinese community in Germany quickly left negative online reviews of the book, and some began organizing protests against the publisher’s racist framing. Carlsen hastened to issue an apology to readers whose feelings had been hurt by the wording, stating that its “meaning had proven to be far broader than originally intended.” The flawed edition was swiftly recalled, and replaced with a revised version in which the origin of the virus was no longer mentioned. Thereafter, Carlsen refrained from further comment on the scandal.³

This paper examines how a seemingly local controversy surrounding a German children’s book developed into a broader episode of diaspora mobilization, and what this episode reveals about the relationship between integration, collective identity, and external state influence among Chinese migrants in Germany. It asks how an incident framed publicly as a case of anti-racist activism can simultaneously be understood as

¹ On the symbolic background of the book’s title: during the early months of the pandemic, many children in Germany displayed drawn rainbows in their windows as a sign of hope and solidarity: Stern (2020).

² Steindamm, Constanze (2021), *Ein Corona Regenbogen für Anna und Moritz*. Hamburg: Carlsen. 4.

³ The Times (2021); die Welt (2021); The New York Times (2021). For a Chinese perspective, see: Global Times (2021).

part of a wider constellation of political sensitivities, transnational loyalties, and indirect state pressure. The central argument advanced here is that the Carlsen scandal cannot be reduced either to a spontaneous grassroots reaction or to a straightforward instance of foreign interference. Rather, it emerged at the intersection of deep structural integration, persistent symbolic vulnerability, and the availability of transnational identity frameworks that enable rapid collective mobilization. It is precisely this intersection – between embeddedness in German society and continued responsiveness to external political cues – that renders the case analytically significant for the study of migration to Germany.



1-2: “A Corona Rainbow for Anna and Moritz,” Museum of Banned Books, Tallinn, January 2025

2. Integration, Visibility, Vulnerability: The Chinese Diaspora in Germany

Chinese migration to Germany has historically been limited in scale and marked by pronounced internal heterogeneity rather than by the formation of a cohesive ethnic community. Early Chinese presence in Germany dates to the early twentieth century and consisted primarily of students, artists, merchants, and political activists, concentrated mainly in Berlin. Following a prolonged period of marginal and numerically insignificant migration in the postwar decades, the Chinese population began to grow more noticeably from the late 1970s and 1980s onward – initially through small-scale commerce and catering, and increasingly through student migration and other highly skilled pathways. By the 1990s, the German Chinese community was

characterized by a high educational profile, weak community institutionalization, and a pattern of functional economic integration combined with low public visibility and limited political organization. Rather than constituting a unified diaspora, the Chinese population emerged as a fragmented assemblage of subgroups differentiated by region of origin, migration channel, and socio-economic position.⁴ However, subsequent demographic and institutional shifts have altered these structural conditions.

German racism toward members of the local Chinese community is by no means a new phenomenon. As early as 1995, a generalized negative stigma was attached to Chinese migrants after *das Bild* gave prominence to a false allegation that a Chinese restaurant in Berlin was selling dog meat. The scandal deeply shook the Chinese community in Germany: the Chinese restaurant sector collapsed almost overnight, and individuals of Chinese origin became targets of humiliation and boycott.⁵

To understand why such episodes recur, and why they so readily crystallize around “the Chinese,” it may help to situate them within a longer cultural-discursive backdrop. During the early twentieth-century first wave of Chinese migration to Germany, German reportage and literary writing described these migrants through recurring narrative contrasts – educated students and intellectuals on the one hand, and a poorer commercial enclave cast as the Yellow Quarter (*Gelbes Quartier*) on the other – thereby supplying durable templates for imagining “the Chinese” in Germany.⁶ These literary constructions, which were reproduced during later waves of Chinese migration in the 1970s and 1980s,⁷ constituted socially marked and culturally legible group formations that do not amount to racism *per se*, but rather furnish a repertoire through which later moments of stigmatization can be articulated. The 1995 dog-meat scandal can thus be read not as an isolated aberration, but as a flashpoint that drew on an existing repertoire of suspicion toward a readily delineated Other.

The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a particularly fertile setting for this dynamic: once the outbreak became publicly associated with China, anti-Asian racism intensified across the West, and in Germany it was directed especially at Chinese

⁴ Güttinger (1998).

⁵ Christiansen (2003), 161-163.

⁶ Hille (2020), 16-19.

⁷ *Ibid*, 24-27.

migrants.⁸ In this context, remember the cover page of *Der Spiegel*, in which the virus was labeled as “Made in China.”⁹ This, in turn, helped catalyze activist networks – often led by first-and-a-half and second-generation Asian Germans – who organized documentation projects, marches, demonstrations, and social-media initiatives.¹⁰

Broadly speaking, the prominence of later generations at the forefront of this mobilization can be readily explained by the fact that these cohorts – more deeply embedded within the German majority society – combine some higher education, language proficiency, increased exposure to local media, and more frequent presence in socially mixed spaces. This constellation enhances both awareness of the public climate and sensitivity to discriminatory cues, a combination described in the literature as the “integration paradox”: the deeper the level of structural integration, the greater the capacity to identify and frame hostile experiences as discrimination, and to act politically against them.¹¹

In the Sino-German context, these assumptions gain particular relevance in light of the demographic and institutional characteristics of the current Chinese community in Germany. Generally – owing to selective migration policies and the expansion of educational, research, and knowledge-intensive employment pathways¹² – this migration is marked by a relatively high educational profile compared to other migrant groups.¹³ This pattern is recently further corroborated by the representation of Chinese origin in forms of political participation.¹⁴ Thus, a broad layer of Chinese presence is embedded within German mainstream academic, professional, and urban environments.

A more nuanced engagement with the integration paradox in the Sino-German context – and specifically in relation to the Carlsen scandal – requires attention not only to levels of integration, but also to the integrative norm itself: that is, to the ways in which Chinese migrants in Germany articulate belonging and collective identity. This identification is typically characterized by multiple and overlapping loci of belonging

⁸ Zhou (2022).

⁹ *der Spiegel* (2020), see image no. 3.

¹⁰ Suda and Köhler (2023).

¹¹ Steinmann (2019).

¹² Zhang and Knerr (2015), 54-55.

¹³ *Ibid*, 55-64.

¹⁴ Guo (2020), 43-46.

rather than exclusive attachment to the host society alone. Alongside deep civic, social, and economic integration in Germany, many Chinese migrants maintain strong national and cultural attachments to their countries of origin. While such dual orientations correspond to well-established models of migrant integration,¹⁵ the Chinese case is distinctive not by the mere existence of transnational attachments, but by the ways in which such attachments can be articulated through a broadly construed sense of “Chineseness” and selectively sustained through community infrastructures, some of which receive symbolic or institutional support from actors in China and Taiwan.¹⁶

The specific character of Chinese migration to Germany thus creates a latent capacity for coordinated collective action when circumstances demand it, as in the case of the Carlsen scandal. This capacity does not rest on dense, everyday communal structures, but on loosely coupled networks and flexible identity frames that remain largely dormant under normal conditions yet can be rapidly activated in moments of perceived symbolic threat.

From this perspective, the episode may plausibly be read as an editorial misstep, the ensuing indignation as justified, and the concern over fueling anti-Chinese racism as sincere. Yet such a reading risks obscuring the broader political context in which the response unfolded, and thus underestimating the extent to which mobilization was situationally activated rather than purely spontaneous or grassroots.



3: “Made in China”, *der Spiegel* cover page of February 1, 2020

¹⁵ Berry (1992), 72-74; Idem (2005). For the broader sociological framework of the transnationalism within the “cosmopolitan age,” see: Beck (2002).

¹⁶ Leung (2004), 53-67.

3. State Influence on Transnational Diaspora Politics

Having identified the internal conditions that render collective mobilization possible, the analysis turns to the broader political context within which such capacity is activated and given direction. In the case of the Chinese diaspora, this context is shaped in significant part by the Chinese state's sustained engagement with overseas communities.

In general, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) makes systematic use of patriotic sentiment (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义) among overseas Chinese communities, linking national belonging with political loyalty and thereby instilling a sense of responsibility for representing China's political interests in host societies.¹⁷ The COVID-19 period in particular was marked by a comprehensive effort to shape the public narrative surrounding the origin of the pandemic and China's handling of it. The CCP deployed a coordinated apparatus of public diplomacy, official media, and social networks to deflect accusations of responsibility and to promote an image of China as a responsible great power leading the global fight against the virus. In this context, economic and diplomatic pressure was exerted on actors that raised critical questions regarding the origins of the pandemic and China's early conduct during the crisis.¹⁸

In Germany itself, fears among scholars and academics of confrontation with powerful Chinese actors – primarily economic ones – have led to a quiet form of self-censorship by institutions and individuals, despite the resulting erosion of fundamental values such as freedom of expression and academic autonomy.¹⁹ This phenomenon has been identified more broadly by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, BfV), which has warned of activities by the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party (IDCPC) aimed at influencing decision-making processes in Germany. According to BfV reports, the IDCPC operates as part of an intelligence-linked network that leverages its connections with politicians and institutions to advance Chinese interests, enhance China's image,

¹⁷ Christiansen (2003), 127-128.

¹⁸ Case (2020). On China's assertive diplomacy during the pandemic, see: Huang (2022).

¹⁹ Fulda and Missal (2022), 1809-1811.

and establish networks supportive of the Chinese government's agenda, while exerting pressure on actors critical of China.²⁰

In the business sector as well – the immediate arena of the Carlsen scandal – China exerts a form of “grey” economic power. Rather than relying on formal sanctions, this pressure operates indirectly through threats to market access. Analyses of cases involving project cancellations, regulatory obstacles, customs delays, and risk-listing practices suggest that access to the Chinese market functions as a lever for policy alignment and anticipatory deterrence. This latent vulnerability, even in the absence of formal state intervention, encourages the internalization of the need to avoid statements or regulations that might be perceived as violating Chinese “core interests.”²¹ A broader mapping of indirect economic coercion reveals a preference for even more opaque instruments, including the encouragement of nationalist public opinion, popular boycotts, and consumer campaigns against non-compliant firms, in order to preserve plausible deniability.²² Such pressure, operating outside formal diplomatic channels and through private actors, complicates any systematic response.

Chinese coercive conduct in the German market was clearly demonstrated in 2018, when the automotive giant Mercedes-Benz posted a quotation attributed to the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, on its Instagram account, calling on readers to “look at situations from all angles, and be more open-minded.” A swift wave of outrage on Chinese social media – where the Dalai Lama is perceived as a hostile figure threatening China's territorial sovereignty in Tibet – led to the immediate removal of the post and an apology on the Chinese platform Weibo. When asked during a daily press briefing whether the government had been involved in the scandal, the Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokesman did not answer directly, but accepted Mercedes-Benz's apology and moved on.²³

The scandal did not end there. The day after, the apology was dismissed in *Renmin Ribao* (人民日报), the official newspaper of the CCP, as insincere and insufficient. The article added that “without genuine self-reflection, no foreign car

²⁰ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (2023).

²¹ Piekos (2023), 3-14.

²² Adachi et al. (2022), 3-9.

²³ BBC News (2018); Xinhua (2018).

company will be able to survive in China.”²⁴ In response, Daimler, the parent company, sent a letter of apology to the Chinese ambassador in Germany.²⁵ The sequence of apologies, the semi-official tone of *Renmin Ribao*, and the final address of the apology to the Chinese embassy, reflect the deterrent effect of this grey zone: market insecurity and popular pressure, backed implicitly by state actors, inducing foreign corporations to align with Chinese political sensitivities.

Against this backdrop, the Carlsen scandal, even absent direct economic stakes, can likewise be understood as an instance of coercive intervention and quiet self-censorship of the type described above. Negative ratings, accusations of racism, and the threat of legal action constituted a form of a functionally orchestrated economic and symbolic pressure, from the community below to the consulate above, that ultimately led the long-established Carlsen publishing house to withdraw the original edition.



4-5: Mercedes-Benz scandal: the Instagram post and the initial apology on Weibo.²⁶

4. Conclusion

The Carlsen scandal illustrates how migration to Germany cannot be understood solely through the lenses of legal status, socioeconomic integration, or formal inclusion. What initially appeared as a localized publishing controversy reveals deeper structural

²⁴ People's Daily (2018).

²⁵ BBC News (2018).

²⁶ City News Service (2018).

dynamics at the intersection of integration, racialization, and transnational political entanglements. The rapid mobilization surrounding the children's book was neither an isolated moral panic nor a purely orchestrated act of foreign interference. Rather, it emerged from a specific configuration in which a highly educated, socially embedded migrant community encountered a moment of symbolic vulnerability within a broader climate of pandemic-related stigmatization.

Within this configuration, the so-called *paradox of integration* becomes particularly salient. The Chinese case in Germany demonstrates how advanced structural integration can heighten rather than diminish sensitivity to exclusionary framings. Precisely because large segments of the Chinese diaspora are deeply embedded in mainstream German institutions, they are more exposed to public discourse and more invested in claims of equal recognition. The Carlsen controversy thus underscores a key tension in contemporary German migration regimes: integration increases participation and visibility, but does not automatically confer symbolic security. Instead, it may generate new forms of contestation over belonging.

At the same time, this episode highlights the importance of situating diaspora mobilization within transnational political fields. Chinese collective action in Germany cannot be reduced either to spontaneous grassroots activism or to direct state control. Rather, it reflects a condition of dual embeddedness: actors who are deeply integrated in Germany, while remaining responsive to narratives and sensitivities circulating from China. In moments of heightened global tension, these layers may align without explicit coordination, producing effects that resemble indirect state influence and self-censorship in host-country institutions. Recognizing this alignment does not deny diaspora agency; it allows for a more precise understanding of how integration, identity, and power interact in contemporary migration contexts. As such, the Carlsen affair offers a revealing case study of how migration to Germany today unfolds not only within national frameworks, but across overlapping social and symbolic spaces.

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Netanel, this is a very good paper with an excellent conclusion. On the way there, however, a bit more concrete information about the groups and it’s specificities could add to its complexity. See also my comments for this.

Grade: 95

furthermore

88 (exercises),

93 (presentation China migrants)

Final grade: