



The Production and Reproduction of  
**SOCIAL INEQUALITIES**

# Alter Voices – Covid Stories

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A BLOG AND PODCAST SERIES OF THE RESEARCH UNIT „THE  
PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES:  
GLOBAL CONTEXTS AND CONCEPTS OF LABOR EXPLOITATION

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# Alter Voices - Covid Stories

A blog and podcast series of the research unit  
"The Production and Reproduction of Social  
Inequalities"

[www.socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de](http://www.socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de)



# ALTER VOICES COVID STORIES PODCAST



**EPISODE 1:  
WHAT THIS  
PODCAST IS  
ABOUT**

(SEE BOOKLET)



**EPISODE 2:  
THE IMPACT  
OF COVID-19  
ON MENTAL  
HEALTH**



**EPISODE 3:  
FAKE NEWS  
AND SOCIAL  
MEDIA**



**EPISODE 4:  
COVID  
CORRIDOR**



**EPISODE 5:  
RELIGIOUS  
VIEWS ON THE  
COVID-19  
PANDEMIC**



**EPISODE 6:  
THE COVID-19  
VACCINE:  
THOUGHTS  
AND  
EXPERIENCES**



**EPISODE 7:  
NEW  
OPPORTUNITIES**





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# About the podcast

## "Alter Voices - Covid Stories"

The podcast “Alter Voices – Covid Stories” was created by the team members of the special project "Communication during and after COVID-19" and aims to inspire action and advocacy on pandemic-related issues, especially among communities that are vulnerable. It does so by providing a platform for voices that otherwise might be overheard. In the different episodes, the diverse research team shows the different challenges African communities in China and the United Arab Emirates were facing and how each individual tried to cope with these challenges.





# Episode 1:

## What this podcast is about

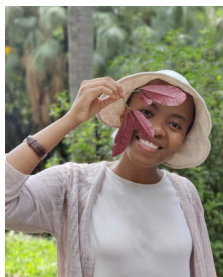
The first Episode introduces the project "Communication during and after COVID-19" and the people involved in the podcast. As this episode is currently only available on Spotify (but not in the exhibition), this booklet provides an overview of the introductory podcast. In the following, all in the podcast appearing team members will be introduced. Please note that due to the sensitivity of the topic, some team members decided to go by a pseudonym.



Dr. Tu Huynh<sup>1</sup> is a professor and researcher based in the U.S., who was previously working at Jinan University in Guangzhou, China, before resigning from the position in March 2022. She is a principal investigator in the project "Communication during and after Covid-19" in China.



Dr. Jonathan Ngeh is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Cologne and does research in the United Arab Emirates and Cameroon. He is leading the project "Communication during and after Covid-19" together with Tu Huynh and Michaela Pelican.



Mamelang Cynthia Mmutlwane is from Botswana and recently completed her master's degree in Chinese Studies at Jinan University in Guangzhou. She works as a collaborator in the research team in China.



Dr. Michaela Pelican is a professor and researcher of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Cologne. She is the speaker of the research unit "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities and a principal investigator in the Covid-19 project in the United Arab Emirates.



Saraellah is Zimbabwean with strong Malawian roots and is a collaborator in the United Arab Emirates. She lives in Dubai and works as a tour guide at the Expo.



Suma is from Cameroon and currently lives and works in Abu Dhabi. After working as a fashion designer in Cameroon, he now works in event design and is a collaborator in the research team in the United Arab Emirates.



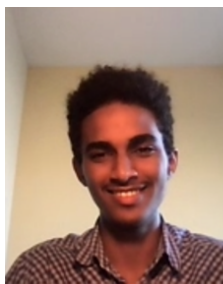
Sophia Mayer is a master's student of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Cologne and works as a student assistant in the project "Communication during and after Covid-19". She is part of the team, focussing on the United Arab Emirates.



Racheal is from Uganda and lives and works in Dubai. After completing her law degree in Uganda and Rwanda she went to Dubai where she used to work as a teaching assistant. She is a collaborator in the research team in the United Arab Emirates.



Yewande is a member of the team in the United Arab Emirates. She is from Nigeria and lives in Dubai. Having worked in marketing back in Nigeria, she changed fields and works now in the healthcare sector where she was a frontline worker during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Josiah is an undergraduate student in Abu Dhabi. He is a collaborator in the team based in the United Arab Emirates and comes originally from Eritrea.



Ify Dennis Egbuta is a Nigerian student in the program Culture and Environment in Africa at the University of Cologne. He joined the project to do research for his master's thesis, focussing on the Covid-19 situation in Nigeria.



Lena Sgorsaly is a German student of the program Culture and Enviroment in Africa at the University of Cologne. She joined the research project to do research for her master's thesis and is part of the team, focussing on the United Arab Emirates.



Dajis is from Cameroon and lives in Abu Dhabi. She is a collaborator on the United Arab Emirats team and works in a travel agency.



Freya Purzer is a master's student of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Cologne. She works as a student assistant in the project "Communication during and after Covid-19". Besides speaking on the podcast, she was heavily involved in the post-production of the podcast.



Ulrike Wesch is the coordinator of the research unit "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities", while also working as a lecturer at the University of Cologne. Apart from moderating the first episode, she was in charge of the post-production and publication of the podcast.



Caterina Reinker guided us through the process of podcast production. She organized a training workshop, took charge of the final production of the podcast episodes, and offered support along the way.

## Episode 2: The impact of Covid-19 on mental health

The Covid-19 pandemic drastically changed the daily lives of many people around the globe. In this episode, Freya, Mamelang, Racheal, and Tu are sharing their very personal emotions, how the Covid-19 pandemic affected their mental health, and how they coped with it. Being based in very different context, namely China, the United Arab Emirates and Germany, each experience is unique, while one can still see parallels between them.

*...I journaled a lot. I got to relate deeply with my feelings and circumstances of the situation. [...] For some time, I suffered deeply with my mental health and I sought out therapy provided by the university. Therapy came with a lot of challenges such as cultural differences, communication and language barrier, all which infringed it... (Mamelang)*

Authors: Freya, Mamelang, Racheal, Tu

## Episode 3: Fake News and social media

The pandemic was marked by the spread of fake news, which greatly influenced the response of the public to the pandemic and the Covid-19 preventive measures. Four team members talk about the fake news they were confronted with and how they have influenced their lives as well as their assessment and handling of social media channels.

Authors: Ify, Lena, Saraellah, Suma

Additional Info: Use of material from “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah” (official website: <https://www.cc.com/shows/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah>)

## Episode 4: Covid Corridor

Imagine living in a crowded environment with very limited space when a new and deadly pandemic is rapidly spreading all over the world. In this episode Suma talks about how Covid-19 impacted life in a labor camp in the United Arab Emirates.

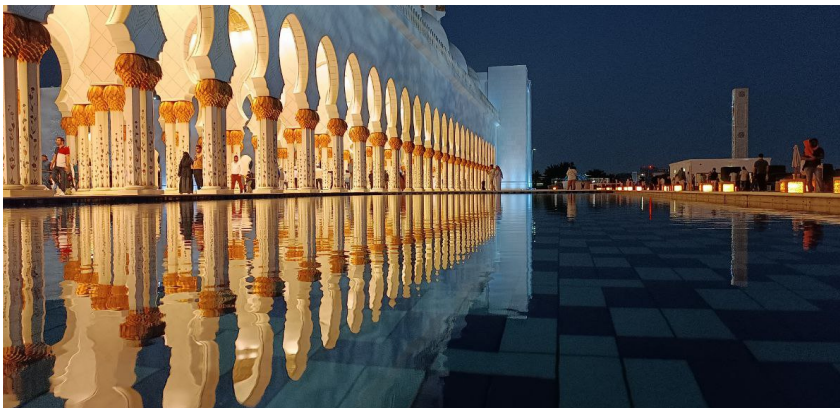
*...As the number of cases began to rise in the accommodation, most people who were affected, were those spotted always standing at the crowded corridor, to the point that some friends named the corridor COVID-Corridor.... (Suma)*

Authors: Suma, Michaela

## Episode 5: Religious Views on the Covid-19 pandemic

Have you ever thought about how your religious beliefs shape your understanding and response to the Covid-19 pandemic? In this episode, four members of the team discuss the centrality of religion in people's views on the pandemic and their attitudes toward the mitigation measures against it.

Authors: Ify, Jonathan, Lena, Suma





## Episode 6: The Covid-19 vaccine

"If you are really wise you will immunize" – a slogan representing only one view on the Covid-19 vaccination. By the inputs of four team members this episode portrays that no matter where on the globe, the thoughts and feelings about the COVID-19 vaccine are very diverse and are informed by very personal experiences that are worth understanding.

*...If others are vaccinated and you are not, it will be problematic at the level of sharing the room, cause you might be treated like an unwanted person given the fact that your colleagues might see you as someone who exposes them to danger of the COVID-19 pandemic.... (Suma)*

Authors: Dajis, Sophia, Suma, Yewande

## Episode 7: New Opportunities

For many the pandemic resulted in negative consequences. But it also brought about changes that at the same time resulted in new opportunities. In the last episode of our Podcast, four team members talk about (new) opportunities that have arisen for them (and others) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

*...Universities are kind of segregated between male and female campuses due to some cultural constraints [...]. But then during Corona we were introduced to these virtual platforms and it was no longer hard to incorporate and integrate male and female students in classes [...] I get to hear their thoughts, their opinion about stuff and it is what I appreciate most about a collateral beauty of the pandemic... (Josiah)*

Authors: Freya, Josiah, Michaela, Yewande





# The blog "AlterVoice"

The blog "AlterVoice" predated the publication of the podcast and was created by the research team which is based in Guangdong Province, China. The team members Tu Huynh, Mamelang Cynthia Mmutlwane, Abubakarr Sajor Barrie, Dr. Ohene Opoku Agyemang, Ruyuan Zeng, Hao Han, Yang Fan, and Xiang Wenjie are scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds in Chinese Studies, Communication, and International Relations and Designing, who also belong to communities from Southern and Western Africa as well as Southern China. Found in 2021, "AlterVoice" is an online platform that complements the academic research that the team conducted in China with a more personal and artistic touch and aims to provide a creative sharing space on issues concerning COVID-19. When the local government deemed the project sensitive to national security, the team first was forbidden to publish this blog until now.

*...Communication was key in keeping us, who are international students at the Southern Medical University in Guangzhou, sane during this period.... (quote from Kodzo Lalit Dzifa's report who studies at Southern Medical University, Guangzhou, China)*



### Call for Submissions:

The "AlterVoice" is an ongoing endeavor to collect articles, essays, poems, and artworks by people who live or have lived in China between 2020-2021, to collect experiences to answer the following questions: 1) How has communication shaped different communities' consciousness of the corona crisis, and (2) Has the corona crisis reinforced existing inequalities or generated new opportunities for individuals or groups of people.

If you would like to share your experiences and support the research, you can send your submission to:  
**altervoicesincovid19@gmail.com**



当时真的很烦躁，本来以为打个电话就可以更改的东西，又跑好远去弄半天还弄不好，还很担心回不了学校毕业手续啥的很麻烦。最后发现其实流程确实是很简单的，只不过执行的人把它搞复杂了，做了很多无用功所以感到很沮丧，也气自己不好好填信息把事情搞的这么复杂。

(a Chinese story by Ms Zheng (left picture), student in Guangzhou for her master's degree)

[www.socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de/podcast-and-blog](http://www.socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de/podcast-and-blog)

# About the project "Communication during and after Covid-19"

**(Re)producing social inequalities and/or opportunities among African migrants in the United Arab Emirates and China**

The "Alter Voices - Covid Stories" podcast series and blog are one of the outputs of the research unit "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities" funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. The research unit entails four projects and the special project "Communication during and after Covid-19: (re)producing social inequalities and/or opportunities among African migrants in the United Arab Emirates and China", on which the podcast and blog are based.

The project studies the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on African migrants in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and China. While COVID-19 is unequivocally a health crisis, this study also views it as producing a crisis of communication. Communication is seen here as an act of transmitting or exchanging information in all its forms. The analysis examines three parallel networks of communication relating to a) the host governments, b) the governments of the migrants' home countries, and c) the migrant groups in focus. Whether it is about testing, contact tracing, quarantine, income subsidies or misinformation, communication is seen here as having vital a role in producing/reproducing social and structural inequalities. However, the pandemic also has the potential to create opportunities and facilitate novel social responses, which are another focus of the project.

## **Working with our collaborators**

The project incorporates participatory and collaborative research methods that are more hands-off for the researchers and hands-on for the research collaborators. Our collaborators are mostly Africans as well as non-Africans closely connected to African migrants in China and the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, the project also incorporates student assistants and master's students from the University of Cologne who - besides conducting research in the United Arab Emirates and Nigeria - also chip in their experiences of living through the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany.

By not only simply doing research *on* but *with* people, and by integrating them actively in all stages of the research, this project aims at overcoming power hierarchies and enabling joint knowledge production. Furthermore, the project takes a comparative approach by studying African migrants in two locations. The different outcomes help to assess the relevance of the respective host country's approaches to managing the pandemic.

# About the research unit "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities"

The research unit “The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Global Contexts and Concepts of Labor Exploitation” addresses the overarching question of why attempts aimed at increasing equality often have contributed to generating more durable inequalities. The unit consists of four projects and one special project on Covid-19:

- From global standards to unequal treatment: The ILO and the concept of “native labor” (Prof. Dr. Ulrike Linder, Fabiana Kutsche, University of Cologne)
- Chinese indentured labor as “new slavery”: Perspectives from South Africa and China (Prof. Dr. Tu Huynh, Jinan University, Guangzhou)
- Debates on “trafficking in persons and slavery” in Cameroon (Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican, Dr. Jonathan Nghé, University of Cologne)
- “Development” fostering social inequality?: A study on labor arrangements in Ethiopia’s manufacturing sector (Prof. Dr. Meron Zeleke Eresso, Addis Ababa University)
- Special Project on COVID-19: Communication during and after COVID-19: (re)producing social inequalities and/or opportunities among African migrants in the United Arab Emirates and China (Prof. Dr. Tu Huynh, Dr. Jonathan Nghé, Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican)

## **The focus of the research**

The research unit aims at a broad understanding of inequality and exploitation with a specific interest in the mechanisms that produce and reproduce inequality. As a way of addressing this general question, it focuses on concepts such as "New Slavery", "Human Trafficking", "Development through Cheap/Abundant Labor" and "Native Labour", and how they are being used in academic and political discourse. The members of the research unit study how these concepts have circulated on a global scale, adopting both a historical and contemporary perspective. They also investigate how these concepts have been negotiated, translated, and adapted by institutional and individual actors with the aim of challenging social inequalities, while eventually contributing to the production of those same, or new, inequalities. Ultimately, the research unit aims to interpret global labor regimes and to draw lessons from experiences for societies in both the Global South and North.

## **Addressing epistemic inequality**

The production of knowledge (eg. through academic research and publications) is still dominated by individuals and institutions of the Global North. As a result, the experiences and ideas of large parts of the world's population find less attention, thus reproducing inequality. To battle this problem, the research unit brings together senior and junior researchers across disciplines based in the Global South and North. Since the team is located all over the world, most communication happens via zoom.

To get insight into the day-to-day work of the unit, check out our Code of Conduct ([www.socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de/code-of-conduct](http://www.socialinequalities.uni-koeln.de/code-of-conduct)).

# Credits

## **Podcast:**

Scripts by Tu Huynh, Mamelang, Michaela Pelican, Jonathan Ngeh, Suma, Dajis, Sophia Mayer, Freya Purzer, Racheal, Yewande, Saraella, Jasiah, Ulrike Wesch, Ify Egbuta, and Lena Sgorsaly.

Post-production by Caterina Reinker, Ulrike Wesch, and Freya Purzer.

Artwork by Ruyuan Zeng.

Podcast Music by HoliznaCCO – Title: What.

## **Booklet:**

The booklet as well as the poster and slide show have been created by Sophia Mayer, Juliana Hagman, and Anna Wölki for the purpose of the exhibition of the "Alter Voices - Covid Stories" podcast in the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, 16.05.-11.06.2023.

The pictures are from the private collections of Tu Huynh, Saleh Adem, Sophia Mayer, and Michaela Pelican.

# Acknowledgements

We thank all research participants and collaborators for contributing to the "Alter Voices - Covid Stories" podcast and the "AlterVoice" blog.



# Alter Voices - Covid Stories

This booklet offers complementary information about the "Alter Voices - Covid Stories" podcast series, as well as the blog that has been published online under the same name. The podcast series and blog are one outcome of the work of research teams based in the United Arab Emirates and China. They from the questions: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the production and reproduction of social inequalities as well as the emergence of opportunities for especially vulnerable migrants? And which role does communication play in this context?

Alter Voices is a platform that complements academic research with a more personal and artistic touch. Alter Voices' aim is to inspire action and advocacy on pandemic-related issues, especially among communities that are vulnerable. It brings together original stories, writings and artworks by individuals in the respective communities to share their experiences with how we all coped with COVID-19 since 2020.

Please scan the QR code to listen to the podcast on Spotify and check out the website ([www.socialinequalities.de](http://www.socialinequalities.de)) for more information and access to the blog.

