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The Weight Women Carry: Research on the Visible and Invisible Baggage in Suitcase Trade between China and Africa

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Grounded in ethnographic observations, this article offers a commentary on the visible and invisible dynamics of mobility between China and West and Central Africa. It follows the transnational trajectories of African trader women and takes stock of some of the weight that these women shoulder during trips where goods and money are set in motion. The materiality of the transported consumer items shapes traders' experiences of mobility and immobility. Trader women also must carry immaterial baggage relating to what their mobile, racialized female bodies represent to various people they encounter. Specifically, the Chinese state and general public view their bodies as threats to social order and, in the context of Ebola and COVID-19, as threats to public health. Our analysis also attends to the weight that female scholars metaphorically carry while conducting research. We devote space to addressing our presence as White researchers, thus attending to methodological opaqueness alongside issues of hidden geographies in transnational trade and migration. **Key Words:** China, ethnography, gender, race, suitcase trade.

Situated in the context of the southern Chinese City of Guangzhou, we, two White female researchers, have spent time getting to know communities of African trader women who consider themselves to be working “in the elsewhere.” In this transnational space, our experiences provided a basis for a shared sense of solidarity with our research participants but also highlighted our differences in manifold ways. Race and gender heavily shape social interactions in this fieldwork space—a dynamic that, when recognized, compels scholars to pay attention to the various ways in which their gendered and racialized identities affect how knowledge is produced. In fact, feminist methodologies insist on articulating the conceptual, theoretical, and ethical perspectives that constitute the foundation for knowledge production (Harrison 2009). Although female scholars historically have been more inclined to consider “how identity enriches the research process” (Nyantakyi-Frimpong 2021), more male researchers are adopting feminist approaches, acknowledging the relational aspects associated with their engagement and interaction with research participants.

Ongoing discussions about positionality in the disciplines of geography and anthropology have informed our thinking. This coauthored work does not endeavor to contribute directly to this concept but focuses on acts of positioning in our encounters and interactions with people in the field. Further, rather than accounting for positionality at the outset of the article and then moving on, we carry it with us throughout our analysis of entrepreneurial

activities in China–Africa transnational spaces. As researchers, we are often one step behind in understanding the unfolding situations we take part in during data collection. Cultural encounters are “shifting processes” characterized by unequal power arrangements, yielding different outcomes for everyone involved (Robertson 2002, 790). The participants appearing in our research must also engage with processes of positioning as they respond to situations over which they sometimes have little control. As we attempted to strategically manage how we appear to others, the bodies with which we carried out our research became liabilities in unpredictable ways.

This article is based on multisited ethnographic research between China and West and Central Africa. We have both spent considerable time in Guangzhou among African transnational trader women, but never conducted fieldwork jointly. The first author has worked for several years in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), but has conducted only short-term research trips to Guangzhou since 2016, whereas the second author lived there with her family for over two-and-a-half years between 2009 and 2019 and made shorter research trips to West African countries. We carried out our respective fieldwork with different linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds, yet ended up with some similar experiences and interpretations that form the basis for this collaborative endeavor. As such, we use the first-person pronoun *I* to refer to either one of us.

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In what follows, we analyze the strategies we deployed as White female researchers, as well as those used by African female traders through two concepts: weight and visibility. Here, we understand weight to mean material loads, such as the commodities for import, or the children we tie to our waist when we travel. It furthermore refers to the immaterial loads we carry, which are largely connected to our gender and race. For instance, part of our baggage comes with being women, because we are more vulnerable to gender-based harassment, which requires emotional labor and incurs practical inconvenience. Further, as researchers, we must also be aware of the ever-shifting power dynamics that require ongoing ethical decision making. Our own entry into African communities in southern China was aided by a racial otherness that we shared with our research participants. In that sense, we were all “others” in China, but this otherness is experienced very differently for White and non-White foreigners in many Chinese contexts.

In examining the visible and invisible baggage carried by both our research participants and ourselves, we are aware of the risks in drawing false equivalences. As White researchers, we carry a privilege in that we can benefit from the default position of power attached to whiteness, one that can be leveraged both consciously and unconsciously. This requires us to make visible the relations of power within each project. In what follows, we address how such inequalities and negotiable relations shaped our fieldwork in Guangzhou, a city where the political landscape and attitudes toward foreigners have undergone multiple changes over the past decade.

Weight and Baggage

“It’s heavy!” (*ça pèse*), said Josy¹ while she unwrapped the packaging from the towering stack of children’s clothes. She organized the recently purchased Chinese-made wholesale items into suitcases, ensuring that each weighed exactly thirty-two kilograms. Later, she would lug the bags into a van destined for Guangzhou’s airport, haul them to the flight check-in counter, and retrieve them on arrival in her hometown of Kinshasa, capital of the DRC. Since the 1990s, the import business in the DRC has been both a way to make a living and a way of life for female and male transnational traders (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). This line of work enabled Josy to maintain a large household in which she employed three female domestic helpers. She expressed, however, that the frequent trips to China nevertheless feel exhausting and taxing. Carrying merchandise by foot and on public transport throughout Guangzhou weighed heavily on her, and living on a mattress on the floor of a shared apartment without air conditioning took a physical

toll. Josy remained vigilant against a rotating population of African tenants in the apartment and found navigating an unfamiliar urban environment where she was marked as a racially different “other” emotionally taxing.

Josy allowed me to accompany her to one of the many wholesale markets selling children’s clothing in the outskirts of Guangzhou. Because the city is difficult to navigate without the assistance of an agent or a friend, Josy had bus routes as well as the geographic locations of the transfer stops memorized. I felt indebted to Josy for bringing me along to teach me about her business. In exchange, I offered to help carry her bags, as well as to assist with French–Chinese translations. She soon complained, however, that my presence became a burden because it prevented her from bargaining effectively. “They see White people and they charge a higher price,” Josy explained. To strategically sustain the impression of a poor African, she preferred to get by on her own with the haggling phrase “*zui di, zui di*” (“lowest, lowest”).

Relational repair work is an integral part of doing fieldwork. Having been made aware of the fact that Josy had experienced me as a burden, I offered to take her to dinner at a place she would not be able to find on her own—an informal restaurant run by a Senegalese woman. Josy appreciated my initiative and compared the dishes favorably to the unfamiliar food in Chinese restaurants, which she believed would make her physically unwell. She imagined the Chinese food, as well as the urban environment more generally, to be more amenable to people with greater physical resemblance to Chinese people: “You are White, you can eat the food that other White people make. But we cannot eat Chinese food.”

A central question when doing ethnographic fieldwork is how best to learn about the lifeworlds of others without taking up too much space or imposing too great a burden on our research participants in the process. The attention we pay to these concerns is shaped by our prior personal experiences, which themselves are influenced by race and gender (Nairn 1997). Despite our efforts during fieldwork to assess the consequences of us being around, the weight of our presence can never be discounted or fully foreseen. We argue that the burdens we impose on our research participants, as well as the ethical burdens that we as researchers are required to carry, are not by-products of research but rather integral to social interaction.

Carrying Respectability

Trader women in Guangzhou take careful precautions to ensure that their social status and respectability are not undermined by perceptions of their business dealings. Insinuations of trader women being sexually promiscuous expressed by other

Africans in Guangzhou, both men and women, render it necessary for women to preempt such suspicions. Male traders, in contrast, can devote little attention to the moral baggage affixed to traveling. To illustrate this, take, for instance, the strong tradition of business entertainment in China, known as *yingchou*. This style of doing business often includes socializing in sites of commercial sex transaction (Uretsky 2016). Chinese business owners sometimes invite important African customers to participate in *yingchou* activities. This style of doing business, coded as hypermasculine, does not carry the same repercussions for a man's respectability as it would for a woman's.

Assumptions about women involved in transnational trade have a sexual dimension, because it is presumed that women who travel transnationally are vulnerable to men's advances as well as to their own desires (Braun 2019). One way for traders to fend off any accusations of immorality is to denounce other women who engage in sexual relations while they are on business. These women are termed as "less serious" (*moins sérieuse*) and are deemed to lack business acumen. Older trader women are not exempt from judgment and assumptions about their private lives. For instance, the presence of young African men who approach women in hotels offering practical help as well as sexual services represents a reputational hazard for these older women. Aspiring male traders with limited financial means arriving to China through migration brokers sometimes rely on transactional sex with older women as a strategy to gain a foothold in the import/export business (Carling and Haugen 2021). On one occasion, I heard a Senegalese trader use the word *pute* (whore) to describe a young Gambian man who pursued her. Considered a community leader at home in Senegal, this woman took pride in having earned enough money to build her house and pay for her children's education while remaining a loyal wife. In her opinion, maintaining family unity is a woman's load to bear irrespective of race and class, and she cited Hillary Clinton as a role model in this regard.

As researchers, ethics reviews and preparations for fieldwork remind us that we are charged with upholding the respectability of our academic institutions while in the field. Preparatory processes relating to some of the challenges and threats women might face when they navigate their field sites are rare, however. The necessity for female academics to manage their vulnerability to sexual harassment during fieldwork has recently become more openly discussed in academia.² Given that the reputation of an academic institution is partly reflected in its researchers, a woman who is harassed during fieldwork represents a potential institutional liability (Huang 2016). Consequently, universities have begun to implement elaborate procedures for assessing and mitigating these kinds of

risks. In the worst of cases, these procedures allow them to offload any liability onto the researcher, as is exemplified in one woman's account of rape in the field (L. T. Schneider 2020).

The politics of respectability are in motion for both female researchers and research participants who face moral judgment from communities, institutions, and peer groups, requiring intricate impression management. In the following section, we shift our attention to some of the fears and anxieties linked to bodies labeled as "foreign" and to what these bodies are perceived to carry.

Foreign Bodies as Vessels for Disease

Before returning to Kinshasa, Josy asked me to keep one of her bags in my Guangzhou apartment to collect at a later date. A few months later, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa rendered traveling to China more difficult and Josy could not obtain a visa. People arriving to Guangzhou from Ebola-struck countries were lodged free of charge in a hotel owned by a Chinese state-owned enterprise. This hotel reserved four floors for African travelers and one for officials from the Public Security Bureau. The visitors were allowed to visit markets as usual and were given a mobile phone so that Public Security Bureau officials could call daily and check up on their health.

The Ebola outbreak amplified an already brewing hostility toward foreigners in Guangzhou. District officials working in neighborhoods popular with traders used Ebola as a pretext to introduce new stringent measures. These ranged from removing street hawkers and Muslim butchers to prohibiting the rental of low-end apartments to foreigners. Chinese landlords and business owners publicly protested the new restrictions, which incurred economic losses, but to no avail. Streets were laced with red banners bearing cautionary messages written in Chinese, such as "Increase Ebola awareness, use science to fight it." The banners invoked anxiety in the population at large, and foreigners were no longer made to feel welcome. Nonpolice entities, such as neighborhood committees and security guards, were given lists with the addresses of foreign residents. On one occasion, three security guards knocked on my door to inform me about "the risks of Ebola" and used the opportunity to tell me that they kept track of my family members' daily movements. They instructed my family move to a place where there were people more "like us," presumably meaning Western professionals, a command that was only thinly veiled as care. African research participants had told me of such intimidating visits, but with the privileges that Whiteness and my status as a foreign expert offer, I had thus far not been subjected to them. These privileges were undercut once foreigners and disease became so strongly connected in the

district that all foreign bodies were associated with contagion.

Visibility and Invisibility

On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020, the city of Guangzhou's denizens were busy wrapping up business deals before the Lunar New Year. Alongside the lull of African traders arriving to China on account of the global pandemic, Africans with a more permanent living arrangement in the city face new challenges in terms of their racial positions. Associations of Blackness and disease rooted in other historical moments (Hood 2011) are being redeployed to justify the persecution of Africans in Guangzhou, with COVID-19 prevention now serving as the rationale. Firsthand accounts of discrimination against Africans during the pandemic continue to emerge and are made visible through social media and news reports. The Chinese state has harnessed its sophisticated technological capabilities to register, track, and control citizens during the pandemic, which means that the presence of undocumented migrants without any traceability represent a threat. Local campaigning to identify and apprehend undocumented migrants who are otherwise invisible to the state intensified during the months leading up to the pandemic. In the early phase of the pandemic, African long-term residents in Guangzhou were removed from their homes and quarantined irrespective of their migration status and marriage to Chinese citizens—a harsh reminder that Africans are never inconspicuous. There is a sense in which the threat presented by COVID-19, an invisible virus, further reinforces the perceived threat associated with hosting visibly distinct foreigners in China.

Even prior to the pandemic, African traders living and working in Guangzhou had been subjected to frequent identification checks in public and private spaces. Traders regularly complain of being woken up in their hotels in the middle of the night to be searched and questioned by police, a practice experienced as deeply humiliating. At one hotel popular with African traders, I learned that every room had been searched several consecutive nights save for my own. One trader told me, “We are all foreign here in China, but lucky for you, you are a different kind of foreign. Because you are White, the police are not going to search your room.”

Making Visible the Invisible

Idioms of visibility and invisibility can be extended to the role of research practices more broadly. Earlier, we pointed to some of the politics of respectability that traveling women have to negotiate and the necessity for self-presentation amid often

highly patriarchal structures, as well as competitive market environments. We now turn our attention to the affective labor undertaken by both researchers and research participants through the ways in which we make ourselves visible to achieve specific ends.

After long days spent at wholesale markets searching for goods and negotiating sale prices, traders sometimes find themselves commiserating in hotel lobbies, restaurants, and bars. One evening, while I was enjoying a cold beer in the lobby of a lodging popular among Congolese traders, I spotted one of my research participants, a middle-aged Congolese woman, arriving with all of her bags. When I invited her to have a drink with me, I was politely turned down. She whispered in Lingala:

You should be careful here, people might think you're soliciting sex. Better we chat and have a drink in my room. I don't like sitting here at night because people might think I'm a prostitute. Trader women have a bad reputation.

Indeed, social scientists are well aware that social practices often become more visible to us when we implicate ourselves in the environment through various modes of participation conditioned in and through our bodies. What is more difficult to anticipate, however, is how our physical presence as well as our copresence with research participants is interpreted by those around us.

In our current moment, which is marked by people championing to make visible the structural injustices occurring at multiple social levels, we find it hopeful that scholars demonstrate a renewed sense of responsibility to reflect critically on the implications of knowledge production. This can usefully be extended to academic writing practices, where the conventional approach, particularly in geography journals, is to only briefly draw attention to the various facets of one's presence in the field in a methodology section, obscuring it in the remainder of the text. The limited space afforded by the academic article format places the researcher in the difficult position of having to choose what will be highlighted in the research process. Perhaps we can go so far as to assume that there is a “willful blindness” (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans 2020) implicit in scholarship. Further, as researchers, we actively remain invisible along with our own epistemologies and biases, thereby producing an invisible authority in our texts. Changing this convention might perhaps encourage academics to directly refer to and write about those paid research assistants and interpreters, or unpaid family members, friends, and students, who are most often relegated to footnotes or acknowledgments. Rather than seeing this as a relinquishment of expertise, this practice has the potential to bring about new authority through transparency.

Strategic Visibility

Feminist methodologies insist on articulating the conceptual, theoretical, and ethical perspectives that constitute the foundation for knowledge production (Harrison 2009). Although solidarity based solely on gender cannot be assumed (Mohanty 1995), there are, nevertheless, shared experiences that have the potential to produce copresence and empathy. What follows is but one example of how gendered identity can be used to not only gain entry into certain milieus but also to help foster understanding amid highly patriarchal contexts.

After befriending a young Nigerian woman who came to Guangzhou to buy hair extensions and wigs for her friend's chain of salons, we developed a routine of ending our evenings at a neighborhood bar catering to African migrants. On many occasions, she urged me to flirt with some of the bar's patrons so that we could get free drinks, despite the fact that I was willing to pay for both of us. My friend insisted, "We need to make more connections. You want to talk to people for your project and I want more contacts—these men might be able to help my business." After spending several evenings making connections, mainly with men, I gained entry into a new group of women who were reputed to sleep with men for money. Consequently, new avenues for conversation about sensitive topics with research participants opened up.

As women doing research in hetero-normative patriarchal contexts, we are in the potential position of engaging in flirtation, especially during moments when we might benefit from it, making careful calculations with regard to the degree to which it leaves us vulnerable.³ We observed a similar dynamic among our research participants. Faced with limited institutional support as well as pointed structural barriers both at home and in China, trader women must remain vigilant in searching for new means to maintain a thriving business. African women traders draw from an arsenal of tactics to best mitigate any obstacles they might face in finding the best prices for products or ensuring that their cargo arrives to their home markets intact and on time (Braun 2019). One aspect of these women's labor is to stitch together human networks to ensure the success of their business, a process that requires affective *savoir faire* and often necessitates elaborate impression management. For instance, presenting oneself in front of port authorities as a tired woman in need of extra assistance might, under the right circumstance, serve to ensure a smoother transaction (Bredeloup 2013). Conversely, playfully flirting with customs officers or airport officials is also considered to be part of doing business, especially in an environment where men often hold gatekeeping positions.

Immaterial Invisible Threats

The immaterial dimensions associated with transnational trade are part of the invisible dynamics

animating this article. For instance, highly mobile women who operate outside of family structures have historically been regarded as morally suspicious and a threat to the social order (Cornwall 2005). Moral panics have been linked to financially independent women, with rumors and suspicions intensifying during periods of stressful economic upheaval.⁴ This is no less true for African women whose livelihoods are tied to transnational commerce activities that require sojourns in China (Huynh 2016). In this sense, there is an invisible moral baggage associated with the flow of people and, in this case, with African women's mobility. This invisible baggage is something that women manage and negotiate in different ways. Sometimes it feels agonizingly heavy, so much so that many of our research participants described their religious faith as being a compass with which to navigate these anxieties and troubles.

Given that a successful business trip sometimes hinges on forces outside of one's control, such as theft, corruption, and baggage loss, many traders draw from their spiritual reservoir of energy to offset operational risks. Illustrating this are the numerous churches and mosques operating in Guangzhou catering specifically to traders who arrive on short trips. In these places of worship, traders pray for the safety of their cargo (Haugen 2013). For Pentecostal Christians, ontological concepts of spiritual blockage animate entrepreneurs' concerns around their business, which are seen to necessitate activities such as prayer, fasting, vigils, and tithing. Through such action, people seek to ensure that the physical flow of goods and money so essential to their business is not obstructed by malicious spiritual forces. Although the horizon between us as researchers and our research participants can perhaps not be bridged ontologically—simply because we do not perceive spiritual threats in the same manner—we nevertheless attempt to see our participants by listening to the ways they speak about invisible, more metaphysical dimensions.

There is also a sense in which we and our research participants are now both blocked from carrying out our work due to the invisible threats posed by COVID-19's infectious quality. Bodies on the move have become vectors of disease, reminding us of the invisible threats associated with social encounters. The uncertain future of suitcase trade between African countries and China leaves women who actively participate in this line of work in precarious positions. Although traders are currently not physically carrying cargo home, goods continue to flow into African markets, albeit through different channels. It remains to be seen how restricted mobility will impact suitcase trade and shape the modes through which consumer goods from China reach African markets in the future.

Concluding Thoughts

Idioms of visibility and invisibility have animated our discussion about the various mobilities exercised by our research participants who travel between Africa and China, as well as those assumed by ourselves in the research field. We have sought to shed light on the hidden affective labor practices associated with both transnational trade and fieldwork research by drawing certain parallels between ourselves and our participants but without conflating our experiences based on social ascriptions that in some measure are shared. Further, we have attempted to make visible some of the ways we relate to our research participants. These relationships, reworked through continuous repair work, are integral to knowledge production and merit more space in the scholarship we produce. Rather than view privilege as something that can be “checked at the door,” it might be thought of as something that we must carry with us, remaining vigilant about how we manage it and how it might obstruct our ability to bridge a horizon with other people’s experience. Likewise, we must also be aware about how, as we described earlier, privilege can provide an inroad into understanding the experiences and perspectives of research participants. In other words, as scholars, we must be devoted to carrying, examining, and unpacking the baggage that is tied to social scientific research. This requires debate and discussion within our academic communities as well as with the wider public, which can be laden with controversy and discord but is nevertheless productive and necessary. ■

Notes

- ¹ All names in this text are changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.
- ² See M. Schneider, Lord, and Wilczak (2021) for a discussion about sexual harassment in the context of China studies.
- ³ For an elaborated discussion about flirtation during the research process, see Kaspar and Landolt (2016).
- ⁴ For an expanded discussion of how women’s morality and mobility are linked in contexts throughout the African continent, see Hodgson and McCurdy (2001).

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