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# The Love Child and the State: Transnational Family Formation in Guangzhou

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## Abstract

Transnational families are becoming more common in China. They emerge within a social system that is designed for sedentary rather than mobile lives and favours two-parent households over other family forms. Chinese citizens who have children with foreigners must navigate national and local bureaucratic institutions while building and maintaining social relations in transnational fields. The bureaucratic challenges associated with transnational family formation can cause emotional and financial friction within intimate relationships, while gender norms shape how various family members manage these frictions. Gender and race intersect through the ways ethnic boundary crossings are judged differently for men and women, while immigration status affects prospects for meeting gender-specific expectations in romantic relationships. Drawing upon data from ethnographic fieldwork among Chinese–African families in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Guangzhou, the article explores tensions that arise as families pursue cosmopolitan aspirations at the same time as they struggle to access basic welfare services and legal and social recognition of their family relationships.

## Keywords

transnationalism – parenting – gender – migration – China-Africa

## Introduction

Relations between Chinese and foreign nationals have become more diverse as a result of four decades of increasing migration to China.<sup>1</sup> Romantic contact between Chinese and foreigners is also advanced by changes in Chinese dating cultures, attitudes towards casual sex, and expectations of romantic and marital relationships.<sup>2</sup> However, China's legal and bureaucratic systems have not reformed to keep up with these developments, and remain designed for lives that take place within the confines of the nation-state. The problems this situation generates are particularly serious for transnational families which do not receive welfare services through their other national affiliations and lack financial resources to access private alternatives. This article examines how established bureaucratic institutions to regulate migration and family formation affect intimate relationships between Chinese and African partners. I use an ethnographic description of one such relationship as a starting point for discussing how institutional and social structures affect transnational families. The distance and national borders spanned by transnational families generate power asymmetries that shape the parents' relationships with each other and their children. Literature on international migration has established that immigration laws influence how parenthood is practiced from afar.<sup>3</sup> The current analysis contributes to this literature by exploring how international migration management interacts with local institutional contexts to shape the outcome for transnational families. The families often aspire to cosmopolitan lives where they can choose from a global menu of education, health care, and business opportunities, while at the same time they experience limited access to basic services in their everyday lives.

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- 1 Angela Lehmann and Pauline Leonard, eds., *Destination China: Immigration to China in the Post-Reform Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Daniel Nehring and Xiyang Wang, "Making Transnational Intimacies: Intergenerational Relationships in Chinese-Western Families in Beijing," *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 3 (2016): 1-24.
  - 2 James Farrer, "Global Nightscapes in Shanghai as Ethnosexual Contact Zones," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (2011): 747-64; Monica Liu, "Devoted, Caring, and Home Loving: A Chinese Portrayal of Western Masculinity in Transnational Cyberspace Romance," *Men and Masculinities* 22 (2019): 317-37; Harriet Zurndorfer, "Escape from the Country: The Gender Politics of Chinese Women in Pursuit of Transnational Romance," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25 (2018): 489-506.
  - 3 Jørgen Carling, Cecilia Menjívar, and Leah Schmalzbauer, "Central Themes in the Study of Transnational Parenthood," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38 (2012): 191-217.

The rise of market liberalism in China has been associated with a strengthening of the patriarchal, heteronormative model of love and marriage.<sup>4</sup> However, this ideal does not prevent many women from pursuing a lifestyle that contradicts dominant notions of femininity. Examples of behaviour that may be construed as gender transgressive for Chinese women today include the refusal to marry, prioritizing career over family, single motherhood, divorce, same-sex relationships, and non-monogamous lifestyles. Engaging in interracial intimate relationships may also be construed as a form of transgressive behaviour. Women more than men are charged with preserving the racial integrity of the Chinese nation by staying away from intimate relationships with racially different foreigners, in particular black foreigners.<sup>5</sup> Studying gender-transgressive behaviour and its consequences makes visible the norms and institutions that regulate social life, and is therefore crucial for greater understanding of contemporary Chinese society.

Gender, in combination with citizenship and geographic positioning vis-à-vis other family members, shapes how institutional environments affect parents. Men and women face different expectations for how they nurture and educate their children when they are physically co-present, and these expectations translate into different norms for how to be a good mother or father from afar. Gendered parenting norms are never monolithic, and there is a greater diversity in parenting norms in transnational contexts that span several cultural and institutional environments. Parents can use these norms strategically by selecting the standards to which they hold themselves and the other parent accountable.

The article begins with a review of migration research on how gendered expectations influence transnational parenting. Next, it outlines the forces behind the growth in transnational family formation from China and the social and bureaucratic problems African–Chinese families face. The methodology section describes the collection of the ethnographic data on which the analysis is based. The empirical discussion follows the order of the different phases in the life of one transnational family formed by a domestic and an international migrant, and the challenges they encountered from when their child was conceived until he started school. These challenges included social stigma, access to health care, compliance with family planning regulation, recognition of the fatherhood, and different expectations for how co-present

4 Wei Luo, Television's "Leftover" Bachelors and Hegemonic Masculinity in Postsocialist China, *Women's Studies in Communication* 40 (2017): 190–211.

5 Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2015; original 1992), 127–34.

and distanced motherhood and fatherhood should be enacted. The conclusion highlights how the solutions identified to one set of problems tended to delay or defer them to new domains rather than resolving them.

### Transnational Parenting and Gendered Expectations

Gendered expectations influence how parenthood is performed transnationally. The scholars who first looked at the topic of transnational families and parenthood worked within a feminist tradition, and placed women at the centre of their research.<sup>6</sup> This research was inspired by empirical trends toward the feminization of transnational migration, resulting in a rise in the number of households with an absent mother. There has also been greater theoretical attention paid to the contexts of migration, including how transnationalism affects social relations in the migrants' place of origin. The research on transnational motherhood documented how female migrants from the Global South who migrate to earn money for their families are expected to continue to provide emotional care to their children, and to reconstitute their caregiving practices and thereby continue to parent in gender-normative ways.<sup>7</sup> Fathers, it was argued, are commonly expected to be breadwinners and not caregivers, and this role can be sustained from afar and is compatible with physical absence.<sup>8</sup> The absence of a mother was described as more disruptive than that of a father because other family members had to take over the social and emotional caregiving on the mother's behalf, a dynamic evocatively captured by the image of "global care chains," in which transnational female labour migration sets in motion a chain of increasingly marginalized women and girls stepping in to take on the caregiving responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> These studies testify to the strong academic commitment to documenting the injustices migrant mothers face because of global capitalist production and patriarchy.

While the scholarship on migrant mothers has not yet been matched by an equally comprehensive scholarship on transnational fathering, fatherhood

6 Karlijn Haagsman and Valentina Mazzucato, "Gendered Transnational Parenting," in Claudia Mora and Nicola Piper, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Migration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 121-36.

7 Carling, Menjivar, and Schmalzbauer, "Central Themes."

8 Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, "Transnational Fathering: Gendered Conflicts, Distant Disciplining and Emotional Gaps," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34 (2008): 1057-72.

9 Arlie Hochschild, "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value," in Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton, eds., *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 130-46.

is an emerging topic in migration research.<sup>10</sup> In a paper that focuses on East Asian men's experiences as caregivers in immigrant households in Canada, Johanna Waters highlights that transnational family arrangements can take a variety of forms which break with traditional gender roles.<sup>11</sup> Performances of fathering, like mothering, are adjusted to meet the challenges created by borders and distance, and that male migration too shapes gendered social expectations and how care work is divided.<sup>12</sup> Several studies from Asian contexts highlight how traditional family and parenting ideals shape transnational parenting. Research on so-called "wild geese" families in South Korea, where fathers remain in South Korea while their families move abroad for the children to pursue an international education, describes how fathers cast themselves as heroic figures who sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their children and lineage.<sup>13</sup> Several studies of mothers and children from the greater China region explore how women who live with their children overseas privilege the role of motherhood over the professional identity they have had prior to moving, reinforcing socially conservative divisions of labour and gender hierarchies.<sup>14</sup>

Transnational parenting is not necessarily gender conforming and may challenge conventional ideals. The effects of transnational parenting on the broader network of gender relations in which they are performed must be investigated rather than presumed. There are close similarities between the transregional parenting caused by rural-urban migration and the transnational parenting practices associated with international migration, and research on both phenomena can be enhanced through exploring these intersections. The ways in which migration reshapes, entrenches, or defies existing gender norms has

10 Haagsman and Mazzucato, "Gendered Transnational Parenting."

11 Johanna L. Waters, "Becoming a Father, Missing a Wife: Chinese Transnational Families and the Male Experience of Lone Parenting in Canada," *Population, Space and Place* 16 (2010): 63-74.

12 Adéla Souralová and Hana Fialová, "Where Have All the Fathers Gone? Remarks on Feminist Research on Transnational Fatherhood," *NORMA* 12 (2017): 159-74; C. Cindy Fan, "Householding and Split Households: Examples and Stories of Asian Migrants to Cities," *Cities* 113 (2021): 103-47.

13 Gowoon Jung and Hye Suk Wang, "The Identity Strategy of 'Wild-Geese' Fathers: The Craft of Confucian Fathers," *Religions* 9 (2018): 208-22.

14 Qiu Yongfeng 邱永芬, "Sandai dai fan zu shangchang pu fuchen bai kou duo yu cheng wang" 三代帶返租商場鋪浮沉 敗寇多於成王 (Three Generations of Leaseback Shops, More Failures than Success), 2013, accessed 30.05.2021, <https://gz.house.qq.com/a/20130416/000020.htm>; Johanna L. Waters, "Flexible Families? 'Astronaut' Households and the Experiences of Lone Mothers in Vancouver, British Columbia," *Social & Cultural Geography* 3 (2002): 117-34.

been a central topic in studies of rural-urban labour migration in post-reform China.<sup>15</sup> Fine-grained ethnographic studies have conveyed the structural violence embedded in capitalist production, but also how people use migration to escape patriarchal structures of oppression at home. Capitalist profit relies on the (re)production of difference within the labour force, the most important of which has been gender-based differences. Scholarship on rural-urban migration in China focuses on the injustices to which migrant women are subject while at the same time attending to women's agency. The lens of gender and generation has been particularly important in examining labour migration within China, and as such, highlights the contingent ways family units and household relations are defined. After decades of out-migration from the Chinese countryside, co-present mothering is not regarded as the default parenting norm in many communities, and children are cared for in ways that redefine the family unit.

### New International Contact Zones

Migration into China has been spurred by the country's economic growth over the past four decades, and has resulted in more opportunities for international interaction and courtship. Some of these transnational relationships fit neatly with patriarchal norms where the men's appeal depends on their economic aptitude while women are valued for their beauty and/or reproductive capacity. However, qualitative studies of relationships that map onto global economic hierarchies in a conservative manner demonstrate how the partners living in these relationships often behave in ways that defy gendered expectations and thereby challenge conventional social norms.<sup>16</sup> Asymmetric power relations in transnational relationships have been documented to evolve over time, sometimes reversing initial positions of subservient dependency.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the people who travel to China in search of new opportunities

15 See for example, Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006); Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

16 James Farrer, "Good Stories: Chinese Women's International Love Stories as Cosmopolitan Sexual Politics," *Sexualities* 16 (2013): 12-29; Nehring and Wang, "Making Transnational Intimacies"; Zurndorfer, "Escape from the Country".

17 Paul Statham, "Living the Long-term Consequences of Thai-Western Marriage Migration: The Radical Life-course Transformations of Women Who Partner Older Westerners," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2019): 1-26.

today differ vastly with respect to their economic means, educational background, and reasons for migration. Much of the literature on transnational parenting discussed above focuses on migration flows that are clearly defined, for example as “labour migration” or “educational migration,” whereas immigration to China today often defies such neat classifications.

Mobility from African countries to China is highly diverse. Students and diplomats have been travelling to China since the founding of the People's Republic, and this mobility increased over the past two decades prompted by government funding schemes and improved business opportunities in China. Traders and prospective labour migrants started arriving in Guangdong province via Hong Kong in the mid-1990s, and this “suitcase trade” between China and Africa continued to increase until the border was partially closed during the COVID-19 outbreak. African migrants who land in Guangdong rub shoulders with the many Chinese internal migrants who work and do business in South China. Most African immigrants in China are men, although women make up an increasing share of the migrant population.<sup>18</sup> A high male to female sex ratio can also be found among many other immigrant groups in China.<sup>19</sup> Women, many of them young and unmarried, constitute the majority among the Chinese migrant workers in trading malls catering to Africans. Working in a trading mall provides opportunities to learn to speak English, acquire skills in export-oriented businesses, and possibly get involved romantically with a foreigner. Women from modest background are thereby offered access to cosmopolitan experiences that previously were reserved for middle-class urbanites.

Increased social interaction between African and Chinese migrant populations in Guangzhou has contributed to a rise in international marriages, both common-law and officially registered unions. These marriages have almost exclusively been between Chinese women and African men.<sup>20</sup> While China has become more internationalized, ethno-nationalism has also been on the rise.<sup>21</sup> A central feature of most nationalist ideologies is the will to contain

18 Liang Yucheng 梁玉成, “Zai Guangzhou de Feizhou yi yimin xingwei de yinguo jizhi: Leiji yinguo shiye xia de yimin xingwei yanjiu” 在廣州的非洲裔移民行為的因果機制: 累積因果視野下的移民行為研究 (The causal mechanisms for African migration to Guangzhou: Research on immigration behavior in a cumulative causation perspective), *Shehuixue yanjiu* 社會學研究 1 (2013): 134-59. Fieldwork observations 2009-2018.

19 Nehring and Wang, “Making Transnational Intimacies”.

20 Shanshan Lan, *Mapping the New African Diaspora in China: Race and the Cultural Politics of Belonging* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017).

21 Kevin Carrico, *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

women's sexuality to certain socially sanctioned, mono-ethnic relationships.<sup>22</sup> Chinese women who date Western men risk being confronted with degrading and sexualized comments and having their motives for being in relationships with foreigners questioned.<sup>23</sup> The intensity of such prejudice is even greater for women who date African men.<sup>24</sup> Intimate relations between Chinese and Africans is a contentious issue in many sections of the Chinese society, including some academic circles. For example, an officially commissioned presentation about the social situation in Guangzhou prepared by Guangdong Fazhan Yanjiuyuan 廣東發展研究院 (Guangdong Developmental Academy) made headlines: it reinforced anxieties concerning sexual immorality, and racial impurity associated with what the report depicted as an unchecked growth of the African population in Guangzhou.<sup>25</sup> The report connected the presence of black bodies with extra-marital births, rape, and AIDS in ways that are so common in China that they often do not compel further substantiation through facts.<sup>26</sup> The debate echoed online comments about Lou Jing 婁婧, a Chinese talent show contestant whose estranged father was African American, about whom many commentators claimed that 'black' skin colour overrode any claims to being Chinese; the comments also denounced the mother's moral standards for engaging sexually with a foreigner.<sup>27</sup> African-Chinese mixed-race children are to a greater extent than mixed-race children with a white parent denied claims to Chineseness.<sup>28</sup> They are doubly excluded, because they are

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- 22 Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998): 242-69.
- 23 James Farrer, *International Migrants in China's Global City: The New Shanghailanders* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2019), 139-44.
- 24 Heidi Østbø Haugen, "Residence Registration in China's Immigration Control: Africans in Guangzhou," in Pauline Leonard and Angela Lehmann, eds., *Destination China. Immigration to China in the Post-reform Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 45-64.
- 25 Natalie Wang, "Guangzhou Home to Largest African Expat Population in Asia, Many Illegal," *The Nanfang*, 2014, accessed 16.09.2014, <http://www.thenanfang.com/blog/guangzhou-home-to-largest-african-expat-population-in-asia-many-illegal/>.
- 26 Johanna Hood, *HIV/AIDS, Health and the Media in China* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011). Tingting Liu, Mingliang Xu and Xu Chen (2021), "Social Media, Gendered Anxiety and Disease-related Misinformation: Discourses in Contemporary China's Online Anti-African Sentiments," *Asian Journal of Communication* 31 (2021): 485-501.
- 27 Robeson Taj Frazier and Lin Zhang, "Ethnic Identity and Racial Contestation in Cyberspace: Deconstructing the Chineseness of Lou Jing," *China Information* 28 (2014): 237-58, and see page 239.
- 28 Ping Su, Yuejian Lin and Mingying Zhou, "Identity Negotiation and Segregated Integration of African-Chinese Mixed-Race Children in Guangzhou, China," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2021): online first.



denied full membership into Chinese society, while they also lack connections with the country and family of their non-Chinese parent.<sup>29</sup>

Although official and popular discourses in China present bodies that are racialized as black as 'low quality,' perceptions of blackness in China are not uniformly negative.<sup>30</sup> To the extent that certain ideas about racial hierarchies prevail in China,<sup>31</sup> these can be selectively adopted, rejected, and manipulated by individuals and social groups. In the trading spaces of Guangzhou, Africans and Chinese are drawn together by entwined economic interests in ways that help forge shared identities as self-made entrepreneurs, reinforcing racialized ideas of both (Han) Chinese and blacks as hard-working and resilient.<sup>32</sup> Detachment of social identity from a particular space can be part of constructing such resilience, as Kudus Adebayo describes in the case of Nigerian–Chinese children in China whose foreign fathers encourage them to keep a certain distance to everyone outside the family to reduce vulnerability, but at the same time instil in them the idea that they have the right to feel at home in any place they find themselves.<sup>33</sup>

African-Chinese couples encounter institutional constraints caused by their migration status. The challenges that come from being an international migrant are exacerbated when the Chinese partner does not have a *hukou* 户口 (household registration) in their place of residence, and institutional discrimination becomes more intensely experienced with the coming of children.<sup>34</sup> Formally married couples must travel to the wife's hometown to apply for a visa extension for the husband, where they are at the mercy of local bureaucrats. If the officials are uncooperative, it can be cheaper and easier for the husband to return to his home country and reapply for a visa than to get an extension in China. This results in months of separation between spouses. Moreover, greater political pressure to expel irregular migrants and improved

29 Yang Zhou, "Intercultural Marriage, Legal Status and Social Belonging in China: Chinese-African Couples and Families in Guangzhou" (Ph.D. diss., Universität zu Köln, 2017).

30 Jessica Wilczak, "'Clean, Safe and Orderly': Migrants, Race and City Image in Global Guangzhou," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 27 (2018): 55-79.

31 Frank Dikötter, *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan* (London: C. Hurst & Co Ltd., 1997).

32 Min Zhou, Tao Xu, and Shabnam Shenasi, "Entrepreneurship and Interracial Dynamics: A Case Study of Self-employed Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou, China," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (2016): 1566-86.

33 Kudus Adebayo and Femi Omulolu, "Everywhere is Home': The Paradox of 'Homing' and Child Upbringing among Nigerian-Chinese Families in Guangzhou City," *International Sociology* 35 (2020): 241-59.

34 Heila Sha, "Transnational Marriage in Yiwu, China: Trade, Settlement and Mobility," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (2020): 2326-45.

capacities to identify people without documents have led to the expulsion of many African foreigners. The separation of foreign husbands and fathers from their families in China due to visa problems has precipitated the disintegration of marriages, parental estrangement, and abortions by Chinese women who fear having to raise children on their own.<sup>35</sup>

An added difference between Chinese – Western and Chinese – African couples is the immigration status of the foreign partner.<sup>36</sup> While many Westerners in China enjoy legal employment status or run large, registered business ventures, the vast majority of Africans working in Guangzhou are independent traders or entrepreneurs who provide trade-related services. The family reunion visa does not confer the right to work, and attaining a visa based on one's business is only possible with substantial capital investment. Many African businesspeople in China therefore struggle to retain a valid visa. When Africans with Chinese family members must leave the country, long periods of separation marked by uncertainty about the future may ensue.<sup>37</sup> The *Chujing rujing guanli fa* 出境入境管理法 (Exit and entry administration law),<sup>38</sup> passed by the Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui 全國人民代表大會 (National People's Congress) in 2012, aimed to provide a more coherent framework for managing immigration, making it easier for overseas Chinese and migrants with high educational credentials to enter the country while at the same time erecting more barriers against immigration with low formal qualifications.<sup>39</sup> However, the new legislation is vague and partly inconsistent, leaving much to be specified through provincial regulations and *ad hoc* campaigns by law enforcement officers.<sup>40</sup> With fragmentary national and provincial regulations for reference, the police departments that are in charge of day-to-day enforcement

35 Shanshan Lan, "Transnational Business and Family Strategies among Chinese/Nigerian Couples in Guangzhou and Lagos," *Asian Anthropology* 14 (2015): 133-49; Gordon Mathews, Linessa Dan Lin, and Yang Yang, *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

36 Lan, "Transnational business"; Nehring and Wang, "Making Transnational Intimacies"; Farrer, *International Migrants in China's Global City*; Author's fieldwork 2009-19.

37 Lan, "Transnational Business"; Author's fieldwork 2009-19.

38 Xinhua 新華社, "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo chujing rujing guanli fa" 中華人民共和國出境入境管理法 (Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People's Republic of China), Ministry of Public Security, updated 30 January 2015, 2012, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2012-06/30/content\\_2602269.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2012-06/30/content_2602269.htm).

39 Guofu Liu, *Chinese Immigration Law* (London: Routledge, 2016). Xinhuashe 新華社, "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo chujing rujing guanli fa" 中華人民共和國出境入境管理法 (Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People's Republic of China) [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2012-06/30/content\\_2602269.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2012-06/30/content_2602269.htm).

40 Heidi Østbø Haugen, "Residence Registration."

of policies towards international migrants in China follow orders from local authorities who are guided by political priorities. In some places, this has led to undue denials of family reunion visa, labelled “Q” for *qinshu* 親屬 (relatives), a category that was introduced with the new immigration law.

Chinese citizenship policies pose a challenge to sustaining transnational family life. Children born to one Chinese and one foreign parent cannot be citizens of both countries, as China does not recognize dual citizenship. While dual citizenship has been portrayed as a sign of disloyalty parallel to bigamy in China, some Chinese legal scholars have pointed out the benefits of a limited endorsement of dual citizenship.<sup>41</sup> The push for such citizenship reforms is not motivated by concern for the welfare of Chinese-African families, although they too would benefit, but rather, it is meant to facilitate the return of overseas Chinese and Chinese professionals living abroad.

Visa and citizenship policies interact with family planning policies in China to shape the conditions for transnational family formation. Like visa policies, family planning policies are interpreted differently and implemented with varying degrees of zeal in different provinces and towns. For some local governments, payments for the violation of family planning policies make up a substantial income source.<sup>42</sup> When children are born to unmarried parents, the local family planning officer may require the family to pay a so-called social maintenance fee (*shehui fuyang fei* 社會撫養費).<sup>43</sup> The rationale for this fee is that the child will take up communal resources, for which the family should bear the costs. The legal status of the fee has been put into question because it is delivered as an administrative penalty, while its normative basis indicates that it is a compensatory payment.<sup>44</sup> Some politicians have argued that single

41 Ye Pengfei 葉鵬飛, “Yimin liyi, guojia liyi yu shuangchong guoji: guanyu Zhongguo shuangchong guoji wenti de fenxi” 移民利益、國家利益與雙重國籍—關於中國雙重國籍問題的分析, *Fazhi yu shehui* 法制與社會 3 (2010): 51-52; Yang Shuming 楊樹明 and Yin Hui 印輝, “Shuangchong guoji jiqi falü shijian – jianlun woguo ‘Guojifa’ de lifa gaijin” 雙重國籍及其法律實踐—兼論我國《國籍法》的立法改進, *Nanjing shida xuebao* (shehui kexue ban) 南京師大學報(社會科學版) 3 (2006): 30-37; Xiao Yongping 蕭永平 and Guo Minglei 郭明磊, “Lun guoji guannian de yanjin yu guojifa de biange” 論國籍觀念的演進與國籍法的變革, *Faxue pinglun* 法學評論 146 (2007): 66-73.

42 Jing Vivian Zhan, “Strategy for Fiscal Survival? Analysis of Local Extra-budgetary Finance in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22 (2013): 185-203.

43 The problems of registering children born to a foreign parent and out of wedlock are not unique to China. In a study of migrants in the Gulf states, Pardis Mahdavi, *Crossing the Gulf: Love and Family in Migrant Lives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016) documents how children to unmarried non-citizen mothers whose fathers do not recognize paternity may be forcibly placed in orphanages and grow up with neither parents nor citizenship.

44 Zhan Zhong-le 湛中樂 and Fu Chuang-yu 伏劍宇, “Shehui fuyang fei falü xingzhi kaocha – cong ruogan xiangguan xingzheng, sifa shijian er zhankai” 社會撫養費法律

mothers should be exempted from paying social maintenance fee altogether as long as they do not have more children than permitted.<sup>45</sup> Although the administrative penalty nominally is determined by on the formal status of the parents' relationship and not the father's citizenship, the inclination for family planning officials to enforce such regulations may be stronger if they deem the relationship between the parents unseemly because the father is foreign, as the discussion below will demonstrate.

### Ethnographic Fieldwork in Xiaobei, Guangzhou

Ethnographic fieldwork among African migrants and their Chinese business associates, friends, and partners between 2009 and 2019 informs my analysis. During thirteen months in 2009 and 2014, I lived in Dengfeng 登峰 subdistrict in Xiaobei 小北, an area known for hosting a high number of African and Asian foreigners as well as Chinese Muslim minority businesses. The rest of my data collection was carried out during shorter visits there and a period of residence in another part of Guangzhou.

The social organization of trade was the focus of my data collection. While I did not specifically set out to study transnational romantic relationships, marriages, and parenting, my research was informed by literature on "suitcase trade," where the connections between romance and business is a recurring theme.<sup>46</sup> Such relationships turned out to be important in the trade from China to African countries as well, and thus became part of my fieldwork. Children were also important to the social life in trading spaces. Wholesale malls and factory back rooms in Guangzhou are filled with children: Nursing mothers bring their babies to work, toddlers come along when parents cannot afford day care, and older children spread their homework and video games out on countertops after school and during holidays. Migrant-run churches are important to many Africans in Guangzhou, and I attended one such church

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性質考察—從若干相關行政、司法實踐而展開, *Fazhi yu shehui fazhan* 法制與社會發展 17 (2011): 114-33.

45 Huang Linuo 黃麗娜, "Renda daibiao: Weihun mama ying mian shehui fuyang fei" 人大代表: 未婚媽媽應免社會撫養費 (Representative to the People's Congress: Unmarried mothers should be exempted from paying social maintenance fee), *Yangcheng wanbao* 羊城晚報, 2014, accessed 07.12.2018, [http://fashion.ifeng.com/baby/news/detail\\_2014\\_03/05/34449844\\_0.shtml](http://fashion.ifeng.com/baby/news/detail_2014_03/05/34449844_0.shtml).

46 Chris Hann and Ildikó Hann, "Samovars and Sex on Turkey's Russian Markets." *Anthropology Today* 8.4 (1992): 3-6; Magnus Marsden and Diana Ibanez-Tirado. "Repertoires of Family Life and the Anchoring of Afghan Trading Networks in Ukraine," *History and Anthropology* 26 (2015): 145-64; Deniz Yükseser. "Trust and Gender in a Transnational Market: The Public Culture of Laleli, Istanbul." *Public Culture* 16 (2004): 47-66.

weekly during my fieldwork. The milestones in relationships and parenting were celebrated in the church, and expectations for conjugal relationships and parenting were often explicitly brought up in the church services. A final way that transnational parenting inserted itself into my fieldwork was via my own children, born in 2008 and 2013, which made my interaction with other parents in Guangzhou a regular part of my ethnographic fieldwork. Bringing my youngest child along during fieldwork before he was weaned opened new ethnographic spaces, while also highlighting the difficulties associated with combining work and childcare.

Most of the data was collected through participant observation and conversations during the fieldwork in the spaces mentioned above. Transnational mobility, both in the form of migration and short term business visits, is part of daily life for people in Xiaobei. I accompanied some foreigners to police stations and government offices, which enabled my first-hand observations of how laws pertaining to immigration and family planning were effected differently across administrative boundaries. In addition to the observational data, I collected texts from online discussion fora for Chinese single mothers and women in relationships with African men, and carried out recorded interviews with five Chinese mothers and six West African fathers of children living in Guangzhou.

The analysis in this article draws upon data from all parts of the fieldwork, and the discussion follows one woman – Huiping 慧萍<sup>47</sup> – through her pregnancy, the postpartum period, and her son's early childhood years. Ethnographic accounts provide details about social worlds from the perspective of those who inhabit them and are partial in ways that reflect the positionality of the ethnographer as well as those of the research participants. Following one mother's story in this article highlights how the challenges of raising a child with a foreign father evolved over time and at different times foreground legal problems, social condemnation, financial worries, and contrasting ideas about motherhood and fatherhood.

### Pregnant With a Love Child

When Chinese interlocutors in Guangzhou announced their forthcoming wedding to a foreigner, gossip concerning the circumstances of the engagement often followed. Was the wedding pushed along by a pregnancy, and if so, had the bride used the circumstances to get her parents to agree to the union?

47 I refer to research participants by pseudonyms in this article.

Was the groom mostly after a more secure immigration status, or had the bride perhaps tricked him into marriage by getting pregnant on purpose? If unwilling or unable to marry, young women often turned to girlfriends to borrow money or get emotional support to have an induced abortion. Neither shotgun marriages nor abortions are unique to transnational relationships – more than one fourth of all marriages in China happen after conception.<sup>48</sup> However, the transnational dimension adds social and bureaucratic intricacies to situations that are already challenging. To give birth within a marriage is desirable for social reasons, but also because it facilitates access to health services and social security benefits. For example, a marriage certificate may be requested when applying for a birth license (*zhunsheng zheng* 準生證), which family planning policies often require women to obtain before becoming pregnant.<sup>49</sup> The *Renkou yu jihua shengyu fa* 人口與計劃生育法 (Population and family planning law) is interpreted differently across China. Rules pertaining to single mothers vary between provinces, and are unevenly enforced by local family planning officials.<sup>50</sup>

Huiping and I first met in 2009, when we were both in our early thirties. She owned a shop in Xiaobei where she sold low-cost fashion items for foreign traders to bring home as gifts. She had grown up in a south Chinese village that she had been happy to leave, first for Beijing to study, and later for Guangzhou to do business. Her sociable personality often placed her at the centre of the interaction in the mall where her shop was located. The mall was open from noon to midnight, and most of Huiping's sales happened in the evening when traders returned after sourcing goods in factories and trading malls. The atmosphere was festive and permissive during late hours as traders adopted a 'vacation mentality' resembling that described in the Shanghai nightscape by James Farrer.<sup>51</sup> Huiping's attitude was uncompromisingly cosmopolitan for as long as I had known her, and she explicitly expressed her preference to date black foreigners. This contrasted with many of the other Chinese women I knew who were in relationships with African men, who commonly described African men in general in negative terms, only to highlight that their partner

48 Li Ma and Ester Rizzi, "Entry into First Marriage in China." *Demographic Research* 37 (2017): 1231-44.

49 Weiguo Zhang, "Implementation of State Family Planning Programmes in a Northern Chinese Village," *The China Quarterly* 157 (1999): 202-30.

50 Falü Tushuguan 法律圖書館, "Jilin sheng renkou yu jihua shengyu tiaoli" 吉林省人口與計劃生育條例 (Jilin Province Population and Family Planning Regulations), *Jilinsheng Renda Changweihui* 吉林省人大常委會, 2012, accessed 31.10.2014, [http://www.law-lib.com/law/law\\_view.asp?id=361569](http://www.law-lib.com/law/law_view.asp?id=361569).

51 Farrer, "Global Nightscapes."

was different. Huiping's relationships rarely lasted more than a few months, but they had made her wiser, she insisted, about the worlds of love and business.

When Huiping got pregnant, it had not been planned, yet she wept from happiness when she was told that she was expecting. 'It is my turn now', she remembered thinking after seeing a gynaecologist in Guangzhou in 2013. At 36 years, she was considered an 'aged mother' by Chinese medical professionals, and she had been afraid that she was too old to conceive. The baby's father was Cedric, a handsome West African man who lived in France for most of the year. He had visited China to greet friends and for political campaigning within the diaspora population of his home country. Common acquaintances had introduced him to Huiping. She was attracted by his disinterest in commerce, which she interpreted as a sign of good character (*suzhi* 素質). When Huiping told him about the pregnancy, he had already left Guangzhou. He neither expressed happiness about the news nor asked her to terminate the pregnancy. She was content with his reaction. She had not expected him to commit to a life together, but believed that he would support his child's upbringing, and that he might invite the child to live with him abroad later.

There were several children in Huiping's life when we first met. The babies of African friends stayed in her shop for hours, and she looked after them overnight when their parents went to Macao to renew their visas. Huiping let a Chinese girlfriend and her child by a West African father live with her for a period, although she secretly accused her friend of having deceived the child's father when getting pregnant because "she wanted to have a baby with a foreigner." Huiping suspected that her friend was seeking the cosmopolitan status that a mixed-race baby would offer her, which was desirable independently of the father's financial standing. This echoes James Farrer's claim that sexual capital is racialized and irreducible to capital in other fields, including economic capital.<sup>52</sup> Huiping presented her own romantic relationships with Africans as grounded in genuine affection, and thus in contrast to the shallow pursuit of status.

Many years of social interaction with a diverse range of Africans in Guangzhou's trading malls had given Huiping an impressive ability to discern the nationality and ethnic group of black strangers based on their appearance, and she had a good memory for faces and names. Her small accessory shop served as a meeting point for resident and visiting Africans in Guangzhou, and her long working hours were initially rewarded with a solid income. However, her large social circle did not insulate her business from the pressures of rising

52 James Farrer, "A Foreign Adventurer's Paradise? Interracial Sexuality and Alien Sexual Capital in Reform Era Shanghai," *Sexualities* 13 (2010): 69-95.

rent costs and tightening competition. In 2012, she inadvertently became implicated in a fight between the trading mall management and a group of Africans. She refused to pick sides, and the management retaliated by issuing fines for minor mistakes, eventually forcing her to leave the trading mall and to open a shop in a less popular building. After she got pregnant, Huiping found little reason to remain in Guangzhou. She returned to her parents' home to access the subsidized healthcare tied to her *hukou* registration.<sup>53</sup>

Huiping's parents were concerned when she returned to her hometown pregnant. They worried about her health when giving birth at an advanced age, and about her financial future. Cedric's unwillingness to commit to marriage and less-than-generous economic contributions toward Huiping's prenatal care compounded their worries. In his absence, Huiping's parents took it upon themselves to gather a group of neighbours to discuss Huiping's situation and give her advice. Her belly slightly protruding from the four-month pregnancy, Huiping was quiet while the group of neighbours encouraged her to have an abortion. She had already made up her mind to keep the child. In the following months, criticism against her mounted and she escaped by renting an apartment in a nearby town close to the hospital where she was scheduled to give birth.

Huiping went into labour on the due date and delivered the baby without any complications. As she recovered from the birth, a steady stream of nurses and doctors came by her bed to look at the dark-skinned baby. Huiping took no offence and believed that they had reason to be curious because "he is the first foreigner to be born in our hospital." She had fantasised about giving birth in France, but Cedric neither invited her to Europe nor sent enough money to cover the costs of pre- and post-natal care in China. Because health care is free in France, she surmised, Cedric did not fully understand that the birth of his son in China would be expensive. She expected their son to benefit from the French welfare system later in life if Cedric invited the child to stay with him while attending school. Huiping's dreams were inspired by discussions her African friends in Guangzhou had about sending their children to study in Australia, Canada, or other Western countries, although few in fact had the resources to realise such aspirations. With the baby lying beside her in the hospital bed, she had sent a text message to Cedric and told him to pick a name

53 For more information about access to prenatal care and *hukou*, see Ying Ji, Xiaoping Zhao, Zhili Wang, Shenglan Liu, Yang Shen and Chun Chang, "Mobility Patterns and Associated Factors among Pregnant Internal Migrant Women in China: A Cross-sectional Study from a National Monitoring Survey," *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 18 (2018): 165-76; and Armin Müller, "Hukou and Health Insurance Coverage for Migrant Workers," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 45 (2016): 53-82.



for him. 'Victor', he replied, and gave the baby his own family name. Huiping interpreted it as a sign of commitment to fatherhood, and she was pleased.

### A Child Deprived of Social and Official Identity

The *hukou* system contributes to passing privileges and disparities down from one generation to the next. Children whose parents' relationship is unrecognized by the state inherit this precarious status if they cannot be registered. Many children born to African-Chinese couples in Guangzhou did not have a *hukou* registration, in part because common-law marriages and irregular migration made such registration difficult. When the father's immigration status was precarious, couples often prioritized to sort this situation out first, and put off the registration of the children. If day care requiring identity papers was financially out of reach, the registration could be delayed until the children reached school age. Regularization of the father's status often involved trans-continental travel, extended periods of family separation, and considerable expenses. Diasporic social networks, for example organized around business ventures or religious institutions, could represent sources of emotional and practical support for the mothers who stayed behind in China. At the same time, the networks could sometimes serve as a means for fathers to exert social control from afar.

The official registration of the children shifts the relative power of the Chinese and the foreign parent. Once children had an official identity, both parents had better access to legal recourse in the event of family breakdown and custody disputes, but the Chinese partner is in a better position to benefit from these resources. Cautionary stories about how the Chinese mother had used the bureaucratic and legal system to separate fathers and children circulated among the African traders in Guangzhou. The asymmetry produced by differences in citizenship could harm the trust and relationship dynamics between the parents.

Huiping decided that Cedric had reconfirmed paternity and the responsibility that came with it to her when he gave their baby a name. However, for his paternity to be socially recognized among people in her village, he would have to come and visit his son. Huiping had been conscious of this since she became pregnant, but she had not been prepared for the additional problems she would encounter in getting the paternity bureaucratically recognized. The hospital asked her to provide information for Victor's birth certificate. She wrote his Chinese name, chosen by her sister, and her own family name. In the space for ethnic group, she indicated that Victor was of the same Chinese

ethnic minority group as herself. Huiping had asked Victor for a copy of his passport earlier, but received no reply, and she had to leave the space for the father's personal data blank.

"This is a problem," Huiping said, pointing at the empty boxes on Victor's birth certificate where the father's details should have been. I had arrived in her hometown along with my four-month-old baby on the day she finished the postpartum confinement month (*zuoyuezi* 坐月子). She had reconciled with her parents, and her father affectionately carried his infant grandchild around while her mother served up broth with pig's trotters and generous pieces of ginger, prepared to promote lactation. Huiping and her mother had spent the confinement period talking about their migration experiences, and the older woman had expressed regret about how she had been forced to leave her place of birth a generation earlier and was never to see her parents again. Despite their renewed closeness, Huiping had concerns about Cedric's commitment as a father that she did not share with her mother. During her pregnancy, her parents had often suggested that Cedric should come for the baby's birth, and Huiping had referred to his work in Europe to explain his absence. "He's not like the traders who travel back and forth all the time. It is better for him to come later after the baby is born," she had told her parents, reassuring them that he would come eventually. In truth, Cedric had never promised to go to her village, or even to revisit China. Huiping, like her parents, also worried that he would not bear what she perceived to be his fair share of the financial burden in raising a child. At night, she talked to me about the costs of being pregnant and bringing up a child and her worries about how to make a living in Guangzhou when she returned. She was willing to give Cedric the benefit of doubt, since he was used to a French health care system where maternity care was free. A visit by Victor would help him develop an emotional attachment to his child and make him more financially committed to Victor's upbringing, so Huiping reasoned. In the meantime, she sent him updates on social media.

Huiping's parents, sister, and brother-in-law had helped her cover her expenses before and shortly after Victor's birth. She resented the thought of relying on her sister, whom she described as the exact opposite of herself: a housewife content to stay in the village and living on the income of her parents-in-law. A few weeks after Victor's birth, the two women had a quarrel that ended with the sister calling Victor a 'bastard' (*niezhong* 孽種). To Huiping, the description felt both hurtful and glaringly unfair. The empty space for the father's name on Victor's birth certificate was a formality; in reality, Victor *did* have a father, she maintained.

Victor was socially fatherless not only in the eyes of Huiping's sister, but also to the village at large. Huiping surmised that her status as a single mother posed

a threat to her son's social standing. "When Victor grows old and wants to come back and live in the village of my family, how can he do this if people think he is without a father?" she asked rhetorically. After Victor's birth, neighbours had arrived with live doves and chickens to be cooked for the nursing mother, but Huiping could not forgive them for the humiliation of being pressured to have an abortion. She described people in her hometown as petty and conservative. "Many of them have never even been on a train – I am not kidding!" she exclaimed when we talked one evening. "This place is so dark." Walks around the village with Huiping's father introduced me to the neighbours. While my visit allowed Huiping to put her cosmopolitan identity on display, it did not address the more pressing challenge of proving that her son had a father who acknowledged him and would care for him. Huiping wanted Cedric to visit not only to see his son, but also to have the neighbours see Cedric.

The anguish caused by the social condemnation was soon compounded by bureaucratic problems. When Huiping went to register Victor and enter him in her family's residence registration booklet at the family planning centre, the family planning official demanded to see a marriage certificate before he would issue papers for Victor. He did not give Huiping the option of paying a social maintenance fee in lieu of producing a marriage certificate, and also refused to accept the bribe presented to him via a common acquaintance in the village. The problems took Huiping by surprise since family planning policies generally were leniently enforced in her hometown, where many families had three, four, or even five children. The local hospital did not enforce requirements for women to get a birth license, and this practice made health care more available to women who gave birth in violation of family planning policies. Huiping had not heard about the bureaucratic challenges faced by single mothers in China, which are discussed at length in dedicated fora online, but receive only limited attention in the mainstream media.<sup>54</sup>

With Huiping's permission and the help of a Chinese student, I consulted a government-run legal aid office in Guangzhou to see what her options were. They came up with three solutions that were as impractical as they were pragmatic: 1) to let a childless couple adopt her baby pro-forma, 2) to find a man to marry and register him as the father, or 3) to go to another Chinese village where it would be easier to bribe an official into issuing identity papers. The third suggestion, while seemingly the least intrusive, would leave Victor with

54 Wang Yi 王易, "Guochanju guiding: Xiaosan buneng you xingfu" 國產劇規定: 小三不能有幸福 (National regulations of TV series proclaim that mistresses cannot have happiness), *Guangzhou ribao* 廣州日報, 2014, accessed 17.03.2014, [http://sc.sina.com.cn/news/z/2014-03-14/1204187164.html?from=sc\\_xgbd](http://sc.sina.com.cn/news/z/2014-03-14/1204187164.html?from=sc_xgbd).

no rights in Huiping's hometown, where she planned to leave him with her parents after going to Guangzhou for work. "If Victor needs to go to school and see a doctor in my hometown, he cannot have a *hukou* somewhere else!" she said.

Reluctantly, Huiping solicited Cedric's help to resolve the problem. She called him to explain her predicament, and proposed they get married for the sake of Victor's papers, but with the intent to divorce afterwards. She was met with apprehension. Cedric refused to believe that a child of unmarried parents could not be registered, and insinuated that Huiping was using Victor as an excuse to trick him into marriage. "China is a country of human rights. It is not China under Mao," he said. Huiping was disappointed in his unwillingness to trust her word and attempt to understand the situation. "Not everything here is like in France!" she exclaimed after he hung up. Three months later, Victor still had no *hukou* registration, and the family planning official issued Huiping the first fine for not registering the child in time.

### Redefining Fatherhood

The strategies that unwed mothers of Chinese–African children employ to register their children combine personal connections, bribes, and reinvented geographic and kinship ties. For example, a woman I interviewed who had struggled to register the child she had with her deported common-law husband from West Africa paid the family planning official in her hometown in Guangxi province 10,000 RMB (about USD 1,560) to obtain a *hukou* registration for their child in 2010. Parents and other caregivers commonly mention the global educational and business opportunities that their children would benefit from as members of a transnational family. The dream of raising children who would move around the world with ease was confronted with the reality of struggling to gain access to basic education in the mother's hometown due to residence registration problems.

Huiping's mother had accompanied her to the family planning office when she attempted to register Victor. Both women tried to keep the trouble a secret for Huiping's father, whose heart problems they surmised would be aggravated by such concerns. Yet, the father soon found out and took it upon himself to search for a solution. He suggested that Huiping marry a cousin 20 years her senior for the sake of getting papers for Victor. They would never live together like husband and wife, he assured his daughter, and they could divorce as soon as the problem was resolved. The man was willing to enter *pro forma* marriage and to recognize fatherhood against a payment. Giving Victor a formal identity

in this manner resolved Victor's *hukou* problem, but also created new vulnerabilities by legally tying Huiping and Victor to a stranger.

Huiping had another solution in mind to escape the bureaucratic quagmire she was in. She had let Amadou, one of her many West African friends, in on her problems, and he was inclined to help her. She asked me to contact him and help her verify the story. A paper marriage with Amadou would not only solve Victor's registration problems, but also give a face to Victor's father in the village. I asked Huiping whether she would lie to people about Amadou's identity. "I don't need to. People in this place do not know English," she said, gleefully. "They just need to see him to believe he is Victor's dad." Any black man visiting the hometown could be passed off as the baby's father so that the villagers would stop regarding him as a fatherless child.

As Victor's first birthday approached, he still had no identity papers. Amadou had second thoughts before he got as far as marrying Huiping. Huiping felt stuck. She wanted to leave her hometown with Victor in search of work in Guangzhou but was not comfortable to let her child join the growing number of Chinese–African children in Guangzhou without a *hukou* registration. Cedric grew increasingly impatient with what he perceived as Huiping's preference for remaining idle in the village rather than stepping up to secure their son financially. He occasionally sent Huiping some money, but Huiping's parents covered most of her expenses. Neither of them brought up the topic of marriage again, and Huiping quietly paid an older Chinese man for a *pro forma* marriage that enabled her to get Victor a *hukou* registration. The legal limbo was thus quietly resolved, while the possibility to give Cedric legal guardianship over his son was forfeited forever. Huiping focused on nurturing the emotional bond between father and son by sending Cedric photos and updates. She held on to the hope that he would invite Victor to study in Europe one day, allowing him to move far beyond the village in which he was born, and the trading world of Guangzhou. She planned for Victor to spend his teenage years with his father, whether in his West African home country or Europe. The feasibility of this plan relies on Cedric's willingness to allow the "circulation of care"<sup>55</sup> to pivot towards him in the future.

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55 The term "circulation of care" denotes the ways in which the distribution of intergenerational responsibilities changes as the "reciprocal, multidirectional and asymmetrical exchange of care [...] fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks," cited in Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla, *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 22.

### Sustaining Transnational Intimate Relations

Many Chinese-African couples in Guangzhou endure long periods of separation. The separations may be imposed by business needs, which generally demand that the African partner in a relationship occasionally travels away from China to organize distribution networks and other commercial arrangements in his home country. The Chinese partner remains in Guangzhou to take care of the children and the Chinese end of the business. This set-up resembles various other middle- and upper-class transnational family arrangements around the world. More commonly, however, the African partner's absence is imposed by visa challenges. These separations are longer, and their duration and outcomes are unpredictable.

Christian and Muslim religious communities shape the ways intimate relationships are sustained at a distance. In the Nigerian-run church I attended during fieldwork, for example, Chinese women expressed gratitude towards the pastor for advising them on how to endure periods of family separation. Though individual counselling and couples' mediation, pastors reassured women who remained in China of their absent partner's commitment, which helped counterbalance the many stories that circulated in Guangzhou's trading malls about African men who strayed during travels back home. At the same time, the women were cognizant of the social surveillance taking place through the church community. Their partners would learn about their church attendance and other whereabouts from pastors or church elders. For some women, attending church presented a welcome opportunity to express sustained loyalty to their partners. Others found expectations to spend time in church to be a burden that added to the hardship of making ends meet in the trading economy while raising children on their own. By going to church, Chinese female congregants demonstrated commitment not only to their partners, but also to Judeo-Christian ideals of womanhood, and, if they had children, motherhood. While a range of social institutions and networks are important in shaping African-Chinese transnational families in Guangzhou,<sup>56</sup> religious institutions are distinct in the ways they combine social control with very explicit prescriptions for gender roles and obligations within families.

Cedric had visited Guangzhou only once, and he and Huiping had but a few common acquaintances. To strengthen the community embeddedness of their relationship, Huiping tried to establish a joint social network with Cedric through encouraging her African friends to add him on social media.

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56 Roberto Castillo, "'Homing' Guangzhou: Emplacement, belonging and precarity among Africans in China," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (2015): 287-306.

She would also invite friends to interpret between English and French in their phone conversations, and to contact Cedric on her behalf in matters that were important to her. Cedric resisted these efforts, and posited that their parenting arrangements was a private matter and reproached Huiping for getting other people involved.

Before internet-based communication became the norm, the high costs of international phone calls would introduce additional asymmetries in long-distance relationships. The partner with greater power to control the finances was also in a stronger position to choose when and how to communicate. In 2009, research participants presented desires for more phone communication as both affectionate and selfish, since meeting such emotional needs depleted the couple's financial resources and thus contributed to delaying reunification. The West African practice of "flashing," that is to call without incurring costs by not giving the other party time to pick up,<sup>57</sup> became common in Chinese–African relationships. For example, a Chinese woman in her early twenties showed me on her phone that her deported Nigerian boyfriend flashed her every day when he woke up, and before she went to bed. She appreciated the attention and interpreted the communication in ways that fit with her ideals for a romantic partner.

The expansion of web-based communication enables family members to respond to the emotional and material needs of partners, children, and parents from afar.<sup>58</sup> However, improved communication technology does not necessarily strengthen intimacy. Opportunities for surveillance at a distance provided by social media may lead to greater social control in transnational relationships and aggravate suspicion between partners.<sup>59</sup> Unmet expectations for digital co-presence can also expose and exacerbate differences within a relationship. After the Nigerian-Chinese couple mentioned above moved from flashing to communicating through instant messaging applications, they

57 Patience Akpan-Obong, "Unintended Outcomes in Information and Communication Technology Adoption: A Micro-level Analysis of Usage in Context," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45 (2010): 181–95, and see page 190.

58 Baohua Zhou and Shihui Gui, "WeChat and Distant Family Intergenerational Communication in China: A Study of Online Content Sharing on WeChat," in Ke Xue and Mingyang Yu, eds., *New Media and Chinese Society* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 185–206. Deborah Fahy Bryceson, "Transnational Families Negotiating Migration and Care Life Cycles Across Nation-state Borders," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45 (2019): 3042–64.

59 Mirca Madianou, "Ambient Co-presence: Transnational Family Practices in Polymedia Environments," *Global Networks* 16 (2016): 183–201; Dinah Hannaford, "Technologies of the Spouse: Intimate Surveillance in Senegalese Transnational Marriages," *Global Networks* 15 (2015): 43–59.

had more opportunities to learn about each other's lives and priorities. This brought them further apart rather than closer together, and they ultimately split up after five years of long-distance courtship.

Online communication had replaced flashing before Huiping and Cedric met, and they communicated through instant messaging from the time they started dating. She invited him to get engaged as a father by involving him in decisions during her pregnancy via messages. After Victor was born, she sent photos, voice messages, and videos of the baby. Cedric responded with an interjection, an emoticon, or sometimes not at all. Just as she tried to strengthen Cedric's emotional bond to his son, she played stored voice messages from Cedric to Victor to forge a stronger bond to his absent father. She left Victor in her parents' care to go to Guangzhou to work long days in a trading mall. After Cedric said he planned to visit Guangzhou, she went home to bring Victor to stay with her in the city and enrolled him in a kindergarten. The visit did not materialize, but Huiping took the opportunity to give Victor a cosmopolitan education that he could not receive in the village. She quit her job to shuttle him between extracurricular classes in languages, arts, and sports. The infamously high tuition fees for these activities were covered through money Huiping had inherited after her parents sold a plot of land. Huiping justified the expense as an investment in her child's development.

For a short period, Huiping was a full-time caregiver whose days were focused around consumption that generally is reserved for urban middle and upper-class women.<sup>60</sup> She sent Cedric recordings of Victor's progress, and hoped that he would start shouldering the investment in his son's future once he saw that Victor thrived and she worked hard to help him to excel. In her opinion, she offered Cedric the opportunity to be a good father from afar: All he needed to do was to pay for Victor's education. Cedric, however, refused to accept the role as breadwinner for the family. Cedric delayed replying to Huiping's requests for financial contributions, or ignored them altogether. When pressed, he confronted Huiping by stating that the ability to provide for one's child is vital to good motherhood. They both referred to gendered norms for parenting to express how the other party fell short of being a good parent. As their disagreement escalated, Cedric blocked Huiping from his social media accounts. Victor had to leave the classes once Huiping's money ran out, and financial constraints eventually forced her to withdraw him from kindergarten as well. She sent him back to her parents to attend school there, and no longer believed that Cedric

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60 Kailing Xie, "Women, Family and the Nation in Contemporary China," in Kailing Xie, *Embodying Middle Class Gender Aspirations: Perspectives from China's Privileged Young Women* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 41-77.



would save Victor from the social stigma of being the child of a single mother. “From now on, when people ask where your father is,” she instructed Victor, “just say you have none.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

The term “globalization from below” captures how people creatively stitch together livelihoods beyond the purview of the state.<sup>61</sup> Through talent and persistence, they excel in ways that exceed what their class background, formal education, and financial means make likely. Huiping’s biography is an example of how the international trading economy in Guangzhou generates opportunities for young people to transcend the conditions they grew up under and become highly cosmopolitan. Huiping spoke English with ease, displayed great cross-cultural aptitude when interacting with customers and business associates, and had a large and global social network. However, these resources proved of little use in resolving the localized legal, social, and financial problems she encountered after becoming a mother. She eventually depended on her family’s resources and connections to address the challenges associated with raising a child in an unconventional family constellation.

Transnational lives offer families new opportunities. Those with freedom to move may have more choices in education, healthcare, and other social provisions, and their children may master several languages, cultural registers, and social environments. Chinese–African families in Guangzhou are aware of the potential benefits transnational lives can provide, and they may envision a future where family members are globally mobile. At the same time, many of them are heavily exposed to the challenges produced by distance and borders. The ideal of moving smoothly between countries to seize the best opportunities is often confronted with the reality of constrained access to basic services everywhere.

The early literature on Africans in Guangzhou focused on how romantic relationships between Chinese and Africans were economically beneficial for both parties in a trading economy founded on trust and social networks.<sup>62</sup>

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61 Gordon Mathews, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, and Carlos Alba Vega, eds., *Globalization from Below: The World's Other Economy* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2012); see also Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, *Transnationalism from Below* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998).

62 Gordon Mathews, Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang, *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

More recent literature has aligned discussions of Chinese-African romantic relationships and marriages more closely with concerns in the global scholarship on transnational families. For example, Shanshan Lan highlights that the deportability of the foreign partner affects well-being and relationship dynamics in Chinese-Nigerian couples,<sup>63</sup> Roberto Castillo comments on how expectations from extended family members affects married couples' real estate investments in China and Nigeria,<sup>64</sup> and Kudus Adebayo considers the ways ideas about fatherhood and what constitutes a "good education" affect decisions about return migration among Nigerian migrants in China.<sup>65</sup> The burgeoning thematic convergence between scholarship on transnational migration and the literature on Chinese-African families points to a strong potential for cross-fertilization. This article develops this potential by applying insights from research on transnational parenting in an empirical analysis of Chinese-African transnational family formation.

While there are strong reasons to integrate studies of transnational families in China into the wider scholarship on transnationalism, it should also be recognized how the Chinese context strongly shapes how family life is organized across borders. The Chinese state has pursued aggressive policies to influence family formation. While most of these policies were not formulated specifically to regulate transnational families, the combination of migration policies and family planning guidelines produces outcomes that are particular to China. Some bureaucratic governance of family life in China has been lifted recently, most notably through eased restrictions on the number of births. However, the relaxation is not uniform, and conditions for making unconventional family choices in China have arguably not improved overall.<sup>66</sup> Behaviour that is not outright illegal can still incur high social costs, invite administrative sanctions, and make families vulnerable to local officials who wield inflexibly, or outright abuse, their authority. As Huiping's trajectory illustrates, even if family planning policies in general are leniently implemented, they can be employed to sanction transnational relationships in ways that makes the challenging task of holding a family together across borders nearly impossible.

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63 Lan, "Mapping the New."

64 Roberto Castillo, *African Transnational Mobility in China: Africans on the Move* (London: Routledge, 2020).

65 Kudus Adebayo, "I Don't Want to Have a Separated Home': Reckoning Family and Return Migration among Married Nigerians in China," *Migration Studies* 8 (2020): 250-70.

66 Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (New York: Verso Books, 2018).

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