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Lan, S.

DOI

[10.1080/1683478X.2015.1051645](https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2015.1051645)

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Asian Anthropology

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lan, S. (2015). Transnational business and family strategies among Chinese/Nigerian couples in Guangzhou and Lagos. *Asian Anthropology*, 14(2), 133-149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2015.1051645>

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Transnational business and family strategies among Chinese/Nigerian couples in Guangzhou and Lagos

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Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Guangzhou and Lagos, this paper explores transnational trade activities and family strategies among Chinese/Nigerian interracial couples in the context of growing China/Africa trade relations and the recent tightening of China's immigration control. It examines how restrictive immigration policy at the state level and anti-black racism at the personal level impact romantic and marriage relations between undocumented Nigerian men and Chinese migrant women from less developed regions in China. I argue that the transnational business and family strategies envisioned and practiced by these couples reflect both the structural constraints in their incorporation into local Chinese society, and their active quest for economic prosperity and upward mobility in the global economy.

Keywords: transnational business and family strategies; Chinese/Nigerian couples; interracial romance/marriage; internal migration; international migration; China

Introduction

Since 1979, when China opened its doors to the outside world, intermarriage between Chinese citizens and foreigners have been on the rise. Existing literature on Chinese-foreign marriages mainly focuses on Chinese women who marry men from western countries or more developed areas in Asia as a migration strategy to leave China (Clark 2001; Constable 2003; Ma, Lin, and Zhang 2010; Newendorp 2008; Tu 2007). Recently, with the rise of China's economy, Chinese-foreign marriages have developed new patterns. A growing number of western men prefer to live and work in Shanghai with their Chinese spouses in order to take advantage of the economic prosperity and cosmopolitan culture in the city (Farrer 2008). In Guangzhou, interracial romance between Chinese women and African men has been accelerating due to a recent wave of trade migration from Africa (Marsh 2014). Unlike the western men in Shanghai depicted in Farrer's research (2008), who generally belong to the transnational capitalist class, the majority of African traders in Guangzhou are individual entrepreneurs with relatively small amounts of capital, who conduct business in the informal economy, often on the margins of Chinese law (Mathews and Yang 2012). Differing from the Chinese/white couples in Shanghai studied by Farrer (2008), who enjoyed many privileges in terms of immigration status, legal employment and business ventures, the stories of Chinese/Nigerian couples in Guangzhou are often marked by the physical immobility of the Nigerian husbands, social isolation of the Chinese wives, and long periods of family separation due to China's stringent visa policy.

According to some scholarly accounts, Guangzhou's African population started to increase in 1998, when the Asian financial crisis prompted African merchants to leave

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Indonesia and Thailand in search of new markets (Bodomo 2012; Osnos 2009). As the capital of Guangdong Province, Guangzhou has a rich history of foreign trade and exchange. Since its inauguration in 1957, the Canton Fair (renamed the Annual China Import and Export Fair in 2007) has attracted merchants from all over the world. Guangzhou became a popular destination for Africans also because of its warm weather, religious diversity, and relatively tolerant political and economic setting. There are no available government statistics on the exact number of Africans in Guangzhou. According to some scholarly estimates, the number is probably around 20,000 (Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Haugen 2012; Yang 2012). The African population in Guangzhou is extremely diverse and almost every country in Africa is represented. According to Bodomo (2012), the top five groups are Nigerians, Senegalese, Malians, Guineans, and Ghanaians. About 80% of the migrants surveyed by Bodomo were between 24 and 40 years old, and close to 82% of them were men.

The gender imbalance in the African community, coupled with the predominance of Chinese females in foreign trade and trade-related services, has contributed to the rise of interracial intimacies in Guangzhou. As one of the first cities benefiting from China's open-door policy, Guangzhou is not only a popular destination for international migrants such as African traders, but for internal migrants from rural and inland China. Taking advantage of the city's thriving export-oriented market economy, migrant women often work as petty entrepreneurs, shop assistants, office clerks, and interpreters in small Chinese enterprises catering to foreign clients. The convergence of internal and international migration has created an ideal milieu for daily interactions between Chinese women and African men. Due to the existence of the Chinese *hukou* system, migrants from rural China are ineligible for social benefits reserved for urban residents, such as school, employment, housing, health care, unemployment insurance and pension (Wang 2005).¹ Since it is difficult to convert one's *hukou* from rural to urban, and children's *hukou* status is inherited from the mother, migrant women constitute a relatively disadvantaged group in the Chinese marriage market. Clark (2001) notes that women migrants in Shenzhen who encountered difficulties finding a local spouse with an urban *hukou* turned to foreign marriage as an alternative way of social mobility. Similar motivations can also be found among some migrant women in Guangzhou. However, unlike the women studied by Clark who paid intermediary agencies to establish contacts with foreigners, most of the women in this study met their Nigerian partners in business or daily life settings.

Various scholars have documented different groups of African migrants' adaptive strategies in response to China's stringent visa policy and abuse of power by the police (Lyons, Brown, and Zhigang 2012; Yang 2012). Lyons, Brown, and Li (2012) note the key role of the local state in contributing to the "prosperity" and "collapse" of the African enclave in Guangzhou. Haugen (2012) describes the spatial entrapment and restricted movement of undocumented Nigerians in Guangzhou as "a second state of immobility," in comparison to their "involuntary immobility" in their home country. This paper tackles an important yet largely under-researched topic regarding African migrant experiences in Guangzhou, that is, interracial romance/marriage between female Chinese migrants and male African traders, particularly undocumented Nigerian men. I propose that interracial marriage adds a new dimension to understanding the African diaspora experiences in Guangzhou because it fleshes out some of the tensions between state immigration control and migrants' aspirations for transnational business and family networks. Instead of being perceived by the general Chinese public as contributors to China's economy, African traders are represented by the local media as guilty of illegal immigration, drug dealing, sex offenses and the spread of AIDS (Li et al. 2009b). The racialization of black African identity in Guangzhou has increased African traders' vulnerability to the local state's

immigration control. It also poses barriers to the integration of the Chinese/black couples in the larger Chinese society.

Based on ethnographic research in Guangzhou and Lagos, this article explores how restrictive immigration policy at the state level and anti-black racism at the personal level impact the daily life experiences of Chinese/Nigerian couples. I argue that the transnational business and family strategies envisioned or developed by these couples reflect both the structural constraints in their incorporation into local Chinese society, and their active quest for economic prosperity and upward mobility in the global economy.

The data was gathered between April 2012 and June 2013 through archival research and non-consecutive participant observation fieldwork in the African markets in Xiaobei and Sanyuanli areas in Guangzhou. I managed to conduct semi-structured interviews with twenty-four Nigerians (all males).² A Nigerian research assistant helped me conduct thirty structured interviews with undocumented Nigerian Igbo traders. From July to August 2013 I conducted informal interviews with Nigerian traders in Lagos, who had business experiences in China, and Chinese wives who followed their husbands to Nigeria. The case studies in this article are based mainly on informal interviews with fifteen women who were married to Nigerian men or lived as their common law wives. Due to the social stigmatization of Chinese/African romance, it was difficult to recruit Chinese women as research subjects. Since most of the interviews were conducted in busy market places, usually inside the tiny stall where the woman was running the family business, their lengths vary from twenty minutes to three hours. The serendipitous nature of the interviews made it difficult for me to gather details about the women's personal information. Figure 1 presents a general profile of the fifteen Chinese wives.³ Although they cannot represent the overall picture of Chinese/Nigerian marriages in Guangzhou, these women's stories reveal a relatively unknown aspect of interracial marriage in China, one that is marked not by wealth, prestige and cosmopolitanism, but by hardships, challenges, as well as transnational business opportunities.

Mobility and power relations

The transnational flow of people, goods and ideas not only challenges geographically defined borders, but transforms social economic relations. Identifying the linkages between spatial and social mobility, scholars have noted that different social groups' access to mobility opportunities are mediated by unequal power relations (Faist 2013; Massey 2005; Salaff, Wong, and Greve 2010). Glick Schiller and Salazar propose a "regimes of mobility" framework to explore "the relationships between the privileged movements of some and the co-dependent but stigmatized and forbidden movement, migration and interconnections of the poor, powerless and exploited" (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 188). This research focuses on two relatively disadvantaged groups: migrant women from less developed areas in China, and Nigerian traders operating business at the margin of Chinese law. Despite language barriers and cultural differences, the two groups share similar structural marginalization in urban China due to their non-*hukou* or non-citizenship status and their categorization as the "floating population" by the Chinese state.⁴ Not only are the two migrant populations cut off from the state support system due to their outsiders' status, they are also subjected to various state rules and regulations due to their concentration in the informal economy for job or business opportunities. This research treats Guangzhou as a contact zone where China's internal migration converges with international migration. Specifically, it examines interracial romance/marriage as

Name	Age	place of origin	Education	English level	Occupation before marriage	Type of relation	Children	Venue of meeting Nigerian spouse
Esther	26	Zhanjiang, GD	secondary school	elementary	supermarket cashier	common law marriage	2-year-old boy	supermarket
Nancy	26	Jiangxi province	college	fair	clerk in foreign trade company	plan to marry in Nigeria	one baby boy	business
Feifei	26	Guangxi province	college	good	shop assistant	married in China	2-year-old son	business
Vivian	29	Guangxi province	college	fair	clerk in foreign trad company	married in China	2-year-old son	internet
Mimi	27	Huizhou, GD	college	o.k.	small entrepreneur	married in China	3-year-old son	university campus
Silvia	39	Hunan province	college	good	clerk in foreign trade company	married in China	5-year-old daughter	business
Lily	28	Hunan province	college	good	self-employed	married in China	two boys	internet
May	26	Hunan province	n/a	o.k.	self-employed	married in Nigeria	one boy	business
Rose	40s	Hunan province	n/a	elementary	self-employed	common law marriage	no child	business
Jane	30s	Sichuan province	n/a	elementary	self-employed	married in China	one boy	business
Mama	50s	Zhejiang province	elementary school	elementary	self-employed	married in Nigeria	no child	business
Lisa	40s	Shanghai	college	elementary	self-employed	common law marriage	no child	internet
Cathy	31	Shanxi province	high school	elementary	self-employed	common law marriage	no child	Chinese friend
Linda	30s	Guangzhou	college	fair	clerk in foreign trade company	married in Nigeria	4-year-old girl	Macdonald
Lucy	29	Guangzhou	college	fair	office clerk	married in Nigeria	4-month-old girl	street

Figure 1. Profile of Chinese wives interviewed in this study.

a critical site where contradictions between state immigration control and grassroots transnational mobility projects are negotiated and experienced in daily life settings.

The emergence of undocumented African migrants in Guangzhou has its structural and institutional reasons. The African migration to South China has been boosted by the enormous growth of Sino-Africa trade relations and the increasing presence of mainland

Chinese enterprises and small entrepreneurs in Africa (Alden 2008). The influx of inexpensive Chinese products has significantly changed consumer culture and market place hierarchies in some African countries (Dobler 2009; Marfaing and Thiel 2013). In order to bypass the Chinese middlemen, more and more Africans prefer to travel directly to China to purchase cheap consumer goods and bring them back for sale in Africa. Another major reason is the relative ease to obtain a China visa. While traditional countries of immigration in Europe and North America are continually challenged by the increasing diversity in undocumented migration, draconian immigration control policies in these countries also forced migrants to look for new destinations in the developing world. As noted by Haugen (2012), the proliferation of visa and document services in Nigeria encourages hasty migration decisions and unrealistic expectations about business and job opportunities in China. On the other hand, the lack of systematic state policies for the administration of business activities for grassroots foreign traders in China has contributed to the thriving informal foreign trade activities in Guangzhou, which often blur the line between the legal and the illegal.

The influx of Africans to Guangzhou was initially considered by the local state as a positive stimulus to the city's economy. However, due to several high-profile drug-dealing cases involving undocumented Nigerians, Africans soon became the target of the local government's anti-illegal immigration campaign (Haugen 2012; Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012). In the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, the Chinese government tightened its visa policy for Africans and other foreigners. Many Nigerians encountered problems obtaining a Chinese visa and those already in China were subjected to frequent passport and visa checks by the police. On May 1, 2011, the *Interim Provisions of Guangdong Province on Administration of and Services to Aliens* came into effect. Designed to specifically target illegal immigrants in the Pearl River Delta region, the Guangdong Act promotes a reward and punishment scheme by encouraging ordinary Chinese civilians to report illegal foreigners to local authorities. It also expands the power of local police to stop foreigners for passport and visa verification. Due to their black skin color, African migrants are the easiest to identify among foreigners and they became the most vulnerable group in the local government's anti-immigrant campaign. On June 30, 2012, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed a new *Exit-Entry Administration Law*, which took effect on July 1, 2013. The new law contains tougher provisions for illegal immigrants.

Based on research in Italy, Cvajner and Sciortino (2010a) identify three types of irregular migration trajectories: atomistic, volume-based and structured. Migrants in the atomistic career usually become undocumented because of unexpected combinations of factors such as individual contingencies and legislative changes. Those in the volume-based category are part of a sudden increase in irregular migration and they generally depend on weak ties with acquaintances or fellow countrymen for initial survival in the host society. The structured trajectory has a strong link with previously legal flows and can manage the consequences of increasingly repressive policies. To a certain extent, the migration trajectories of Nigerian traders in China reflect the sequential relation between atomistic, volume-based and structured migratory careers depicted by Cvajner and Sciortino. While illegal stay started as an involuntary coping strategy for some early traders, it gradually became a rational choice for newcomers as China tightened its immigration control. Since Nigerians constitute the largest group among all Africans, they have the most mature ethnic support network in Guangzhou, which can help reduce the challenges and risks for visa overstayers. Scholars have noted that stringent visa policy and border control in the United States and Europe not only failed to deter undocumented

migration, but encouraged unauthorized migrants to overstay due to the increased difficulty of reentry (Andreas and Snyder 2000; Cornelius 2001; Reyes 2002). In the Guangzhou case, stringent immigration control not only facilitates undocumented Nigerian traders' prolonged stay in China, but creates structural opportunities and incentives for the development of interracial romance between Nigerian men and Chinese women.

In her study of correspondence relationship between Chinese and Filipino women and U.S. men, Constable (2003) criticizes the western bias to polarize love and pragmatics by arguing that romantic love often coexists with material concerns among her research subjects and there is generally little contradiction between the two. The same is true for many Chinese/Nigerian couples in Guangzhou. Since the majority of the men and women in this study get to know each other in business or business-related daily life settings, romance and business relations are often entwined. This paper makes no attempt to separate romance from pragmatic concerns. Instead, I am interested in examining how interracial romance is both structured and constrained by opportunities and challenges in grassroots trade activities between China and Africa. Due to their structurally marginalized status vis-a-vis the Chinese state, the majority of men and women in this study are compelled to maintain their romantic and business relations within a constrained transnational space (Kalir 2010). For undocumented Nigerian men, marriage to a Chinese woman may provide a path for the legalization of their immigration status. However, this is not an easy option due to the many obstacles to registering a foreign marriage in China. For Chinese migrant women, romance with a Nigerian man may promise an alternative path to social and transnational mobility, yet it may also lead to long-term family separation, broken relations, and discrimination from the larger Chinese society.

Perceptions of interracial marriages in China

In the early reform era in the 1980s and 1990s, friendship and daily interactions between foreigners and ordinary Chinese were strongly discouraged and policed by the state's *waiishi* (foreign affair) policy (Brady 2000). Chinese women who engaged in short-term sexual relationships with foreign men were denounced as traitors and prostitutes. Those who married western men were considered materialistic women seeking "airplane tickets" or "passports" to leave China (Farrer 2008). It was in the 2000s that interracial marriage became more acceptable, following the opening up of sexual culture in China in the late 1990s and the state loosening its control on international travel (Farrer 2002, Biao 2003). According to Farrer (2010), the Chinese perception of interracial romance is mediated by a system of "racialized sexual stratification," with white masculinity at the top, African and South Asian (black and brown) masculinities at the bottom. In contemporary Chinese society, despite the relative decline of western privilege, Chinese/white marriages are still viewed more favorably than Chinese/black marriages. The general understanding is that if a woman marries a white man (regardless of his nationality), she is marrying into a better life and a bright future. In contrast, women who date or marry black men often experience resistance from family members and prejudice from the larger Chinese society (Frazier and Zhang 2014; Marsh 2014).

The contentious nature of Chinese/black romance can be illustrated by two public events. In 1989, the city of Nanjing witnessed the biggest anti-African student protest in China. The event started with Chinese students' resentment towards relationship between African males and Chinese females on college campuses. Since the incident happened

right before the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China, scholars have offered diverse interpretations. Some regard it as evidence for anti-black racism in China (Sautman 1994; Dikötter 1994; Cheng 2011); others consider it symptomatic of deeper problems such as nationalism, increasing social inequality and students' quest for democracy (Lufrano 1994; Sullivan 1994; Crane 1994). In August 2009, Lou Jing, a Chinese girl with black skin entered the Shanghai-based Dragon TV's *Go Oriental Angel* talent show. Born to a Chinese mother and an African American father, Lou Jing became the most controversial contestant on the Chinese blogosphere. Chinese netizens used terms such as "little black devil" and "unwanted bastard" to describe her. The attack on her mother was even more vicious (she had an extra-marital affair with an African American man and was later divorced by her Chinese husband). Madam Lou was denounced as a "shameless whore," who committed "adultery" with a black man because of his "big XX."⁵ As noted by Frazier and Zhang, the Lou Jing incident reflects the general Chinese anxieties over issues such as "who can be Chinese, who can produce Chinese children, what kinds of interracial relationships are acceptable for Chinese women, and the impact of foreign immigration by people of African descent into China" (Frazier and Zhang 2014, 238).

The Chinese prejudice against Africans can be attributed to several reasons: traditional esthetic values, ignorance of African cultures and societies, influence of western media, language barrier and cultural misunderstandings. Despite the state rhetoric of Sino-African friendship, the majority of Chinese citizens still have very limited knowledge about Africa. In a 2006 survey conducted by *China Youth Daily* the official organ of the Communist Youth League, and *Sina.com*, the biggest Chinese Internet news portal, 71.7% of the 5119 respondents reported that they knew very little about Africa. 30.4% associated Africa with poverty, underdevelopment, and AIDS (Li and Rønning 2013). In the Guangzhou context, Sub-Saharan Africans are identified primarily by their black skin color, not by their country of origin, language, or religious belief. In contrast, Arabic-speaking migrants from North Africa are usually identified by Chinese as whites or Arabs, not as Africans. This conflation of black and African identities is reflected in the fact that the Chinese term *heiren* (black person) is often used, in both popular media and daily life settings, as a generic term to refer to Africans from diverse backgrounds. The Cantonese term *hakgwai* (*heigui* in Mandarin, literally meaning black devil or black ghost) is sometimes used, by local Cantonese and migrant workers from other parts of China, in a negative sense to show contempt for some African migrants.

Chinese women who date or marry Nigerians come from a variety of backgrounds. The majority of them are migrant women from less developed regions of China who are attracted by job or business opportunities in Guangzhou. Their educational level ranges from primary school to college and above. Most women in this research are aware of anti-black prejudice in China and they often emphasize the "unexpected" nature of their interracial romance. Several women started their stories by saying, "I never thought I would marry a foreigner. It just happened." In areas where African traders are concentrated, such as Xiaobei and Sanyuanli, there is usually a conflation of "foreigner" and "black" identity among Chinese. Migrants from rural China generally make no distinction between white and black foreigners because the only foreigners they interact on a daily basis are black Africans. Some African traders also fit the general Chinese perception that foreigners are rich because they can afford to travel to China by air, stay in good hotels, and buy goods in containers (Liao 2014). Chinese women who date or marry Africans are sometimes criticized by other migrants, especially elderly males from rural origin, for marrying foreigners for money. Fully aware of this stereotype, most of the women I interviewed emphasize true love as the foundation of their marriage.

Others mentioned an extended period of premarital courtship (about one to two years), during which the Nigerian partners pursued them enthusiastically.

Despite their awareness of anti-black prejudice in China, most of the women are still unprepared for the everyday racism they encountered in public spaces. Esther, a 26-year-old female migrant from Zhanjiang, told me, “I encountered lots of discrimination from people around me. They think we marry blacks for money. They call us bad names like ‘second wives’, etc. I don’t like it. They didn’t know me personally, they just saw me walking with a black man and they started looking down upon me.” Compared to the negative experiences of the mother, Chinese/African babies seem to be more vulnerable to race and color-based prejudice. Feifei, a 27-year-old woman from Guangxi province, explained to me, “Chinese discriminate black people a lot. When my family goes out together, people would talk behind our backs. Some Chinese kids once called my baby ‘little black devil.’ I am so worried that my baby would get hurt by such prejudice.” Feifei told me that she would sometimes return secretly to the kindergarten in order to check if her son was doing okay there. She said, “My son is too young to understand it now. I plan to send him to be educated in Hong Kong or overseas when he gets older, so that he would not be hurt by anti-black racism in China.”

In addition to everyday racism encountered in the larger Chinese society, most women also need to face pressures from parents and family members. Esther’s mother once locked her in a room at home to prevent her from visiting her Nigerian boyfriend in Guangzhou. Feifei’s parents were originally against her interracial marriage, but they relented after she gave birth to a baby boy. Vivian, another migrant woman from Guangxi, told me that her brother still refused to talk to her due to her marriage with a black man. On the other hand, I also heard happy stories when the African son-in-law was welcomed into the Chinese family and even treated with honor. Disapproval from family members proved to be a minor thing when compared with the local state’s stringent immigration control policies. As a matter of fact, most of the women’s complaints are focused on the enormous obstacles they have to face in order to legalize their marriages in China, the emotional turmoil for enduring long time separation from their partners, and the Chinese state’s discriminatory visa policy towards African migrants.

Circuitous pathways to marriage

Within the Nigerian community in Guangzhou, no stigma is attached to overstayers who wish to do honest business in China. However, due to their vulnerable legal status, undocumented Nigerians have to limit their travel in the city and avoid certain public spaces at certain times of the day in order to minimize their chance of being intercepted by the police (Haugen 2012). Ironically, stringent immigration control has pushed undocumented Africans to become more embedded in Chinese society, for example, by learning the Chinese language, marrying Chinese women and forming business partnership with Chinese migrants. As noted by Cvajner and Sciortino (2010, 398), “in economics, an irregular status is nearly always translated into the possibility of charging a higher price for goods and services.” Chinese migrants and some local Chinese regard the presence of undocumented Africans in Guangzhou as potential economic opportunities and are generally willing to provide various kinds of trade-related services in exchange for financial gain. Business collaboration with Chinese migrants may significantly expand the undocumented African traders’ mobility options. It can also lead to personal friendship and romantic relations. For example, some of my Nigerian informants rely on their Chinese friends, spouses or business partners to rent shop spaces in trade malls, collect

market information, travel to other cities to make orders or collect goods and provide other trade-related services.

Nigerian traders' attitude towards interracial romance varies from person to person. On one end of the spectrum are those who dream of marrying a Chinese woman as a symbol of the realization of their Chinese dream. On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who regard interracial marriage as dangerous and even destructive to the men's livelihood in China. One major reason for this bifurcation is due to the many obstacles in legalizing interracial marriages in China. Unlike in many western countries, marriage with a Chinese citizen does not lead to permanent residency. The foreign spouse may obtain a visitor's visa that can be renewed regularly, but he or she is not entitled to work. In order to officially register a marriage in China, a foreign spouse needs to present a valid passport, a residence or entry permit issued by the Chinese public security bureau, and a single status certificate legalized by both China and the country of origin. While this rule applies to all foreigners, it proves to be particularly challenging for Nigerians. Due to the proliferation of documentation services in Nigeria, quite a number of Nigerians traveled to China with fake passports bought from visa agents. Since most Nigerians want their children to bear their family names, they are faced with the difficult choice of going back to Nigeria to obtain an authentic passport and re-enter China with a valid visa in order to apply for a marriage certificate. For undocumented Nigerians, such border crossings can be highly risky due to the possibility that they may never enter China again.

During my research, I heard heart-breaking stories about husband and wife, father and child being separated by state immigration control. Some of the long-term separation resulted in the disintegration of the marriage or romantic relations. Several pregnant women were forced to abort their children because of the gloomy prospect of the Nigerian partner's return and growing pressure from the Chinese community. Since getting married in China is an ordeal, some couples chose to get married in Nigeria first; then the husband can apply for a spouse visa to travel to China. This plan does not always work because in some cases, even though the couple is legally married, the Chinese Embassy refuses to grant the husband an entry visa. I met Eric in Lagos, whose application for a China visa had been denied five times despite the fact that he has a Chinese wife. After staying in Lagos for one year, the wife went back to China to take care of their cellphone business. However, business in their shop was declining. Eric explained, "Some customers stopping visiting because they did not see me there. Others would take goods from her without paying back the money. Every time my wife called me, she would cry on the phone." Eric had tried different schemes to get back to China: applying for a business visa in Abuja with two other business partners; enrolling in a Chinese university in order to secure a student visa. By the time I left Lagos in August 2013, he was still preparing for another interview.

Within the Nigerian community in Guangzhou, the price for interracial marriage proves to be too high for some migrants. As a result, a number of Nigerian men chose to engage in casual sexual relations with Chinese girls based on mutual consent. According to the estimate of my Nigerian research assistant, about 60% of the undocumented Nigerians in Guangzhou had experiences dating Chinese girls; yet only 15% have long-term Chinese girlfriends or wives. For couples who desire serious relations, one common way is to postpone the legal marriage by living together as common law husband and wife. However, when the child was born, the marriage became necessary because the child needs to be legally registered in order to obtain a Chinese identification card/*hukou*. An alternative is for the couple to hold a traditional Chinese wedding ceremony in the woman's hometown before eventually getting married in Africa. However, this can only happen to women whose family is not opposed to their interracial romance. The lack of legal protection to

interracial relations, coupled with language and cultural misunderstandings, may easily give rise to stereotypes of African men as womanizers, as sex-hungry men who prey upon innocent Chinese women, or as cheaters and irresponsible fathers who sow their wild oats in China.

It is hard to determine the percentage of Nigerians who date Chinese women for purely utilitarian purposes because there is always the possibility for instrumental relations to develop into genuine affections. From the Nigerian perspective, interracial romance can be a double-edged sword: it may enhance one's business but may also ruin it. Most of my Nigerian informants acknowledge the advantages of having a Chinese girlfriend. One undocumented Nigerian told me that the best way to learn the Chinese language is to have a Chinese girlfriend. In addition, a Chinese girlfriend may provide crucial help in business since the motility capital she possesses as a Chinese citizen can be converted to economic capital in the case of a successful partnership (Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004). However, the difficulties in legalizing interracial marriages in China also hinder the development of long term relations between Chinese women and undocumented Nigerian men. Stan, a 40-year-old undocumented Nigerian who stayed in China for five years, explained to me the danger of interracial marriage. He said, "If you marry a Chinese, you still have no paper. Your life is insecure here. If you make a little mistake, the police would arrest you and send you home. You may never see your children again. The woman would take your house and your business, because they are all registered under her name." My interview with Stan shows that feelings of distrust and mutual stereotypes in interracial romance cannot be attributed to utilitarian motivations and personal moral standards alone. China's stringent immigration policy is also partly responsible for the constrained transnational mobility dreams of some of the couples.

Three case studies

In this section I provide three women's stories as contextualized case studies of Chinese/Nigerian interracial romance. Although these stories have different focuses, together they point to some common themes. Whether based in Guangzhou or Lagos, these couples' business activities are closely tied to China/Africa informal trade relations. All three women's romances with Nigerian men is partly motivated by their quest for alternative paths of social mobility. They all converted to Christianity after marriage and became more or less integrated into the Nigerian partner's community. This may reflect the women's lack of personal network and social support as migrants in Guangzhou. However, prejudice and intolerance from the larger Chinese society may also contribute to their feelings of alienation and longing for spiritual support and consolation.

Vivan is a 29-year-old woman from Guangxi province. Her story of getting to know her husband Keith is entwined with her own job searching experiences in South China. While still a junior in Computer Science in Shandong University, Vivian registered an MSN account in order to chat online with foreign friends. Her motivation was mainly to practice English in order to find a good job. Keith remained one of Vivan's online friends until they met in Guangzhou in 2007, when Vivian visited Zhongshan, a smaller city near Guangzhou for a job interview. Vivian did not get the job, but she decided to stay in Guangzhou looking for job opportunities in international trade. Vivian soon found a job with a foreign trade company in Nanhai, a city near Guangzhou. She would visit Keith on weekends and the two started to get to know each other more. Vivian told me, "I found he is a good person. His place was very neat and he never leaves things around. I also heard good comments about him from other people. He is hardworking and family-oriented.

He is very honest with me and never lie to me.” Keith persuaded Vivian to quit her job and join him in business. Vivian agreed because she did not like the job in Nanhai.

With 20,000 yuan borrowed from her elder brother, Vivian started her business with Keith. They encountered some failures in the beginning, but soon she was able to return the 20,000 yuan to her brother. The couple then rented a shop in Tangqi, one of the busiest markets for African clients. Later they secured another shop in Xiaobei and hired Vivian’s sister to take care of it. In 2009 Keith went back to Nigeria to prepare the legal documents for marriage, but he was unable to obtain a visa back to China. Six months later, Keith returned with a false passport purchased in Guinea. Instead of registering their marriage with the false passport, the couple decided to hold the wedding ceremony first. They invited Vivian’s parents and some of Keith’s friends to the wedding in 2010. A few months later, Keith’s false passport was discovered by the Chinese police and he was ordered to leave China. Vivian was pregnant with their first child when Keith left. She told me, “It was the most difficult time for me, not financially, but emotionally. I felt so lonely and helpless. I used to cry over the phone when he called me at midnight.” Keith made another attempt to enter China via Beijing, but failed. It was not until 2011 when Keith finally managed to return via Vietnam, using his own passport. By that time, the couple has been separated for almost one year and their son was already two months old. Several months later, the couple managed to obtain their marriage certificate in Vivian’s hometown in Guangxi province.

Compared to Vivian, whose story has a happy ending, Esther, a 26-year-old woman from Zhanjiang in Guangdong province, seemed to be quite frustrated about the future of her interracial family. Esther has secondary school education and speaks elementary English. She worked as a cashier in a supermarket in Foshan, when she met her boyfriend Nick. Esther recalled, “In 2008 there were many foreigners living in Foshan. I mean Africans. I learned to speak English by asking them, ‘how to say this in English and how to say that in English?’ Then I wrote down the pronunciation in Chinese words. That was how I learned to speak English.” Esther’s romance with Nick started with mutual attraction, but it was also fortified, ironically, by objections from her mother and gossip in her workplace. After chatting with Nick on the phone several times, Esther turned down an arranged marriage by her mother with a young man in her hometown. During her visit home, Esther was locked in a room by her mother and forbidden from seeing Nick again. She managed to escape and returned to Guangzhou. According to Esther, it was prejudice in her workplace that made her quit the job. She said, “One day I was walking with my boyfriend and some of his friends, my boss’ mom saw it and she called me a bad woman because I hang out with so many foreigners. I was greatly hurt by her remarks, so I quit my job in the supermarket and moved in with Nick.”

Like Vivian, Esther also emphasized the many good qualities of Nick. Coming from a family where her mother and father fought a lot, she was relieved to find Nick a good-natured man who is considerate, ready to share housework, and never order her around in the house. When Esther gave birth to a boy, the couple thought about getting married in Nigeria. They had to give up the plan after learning the tragic story of a friend, whose husband never made it back to China. In December 2012, Nick was arrested for illegally staying in China and was deported back to Nigeria. After Nick left, Esther sent her two-year-old son to her mother’s place and started running the business all by herself. Since Nick used to be the one who brought in African customers, business in the shop declined after his departure. Sometimes Nick’s friends would introduce clients to Esther out of sympathy, but it is hard to make profits nowadays due to fierce competition in the market. Nick called a few times. Then Esther lost contact with him. When I met her in summer

2013, Esther was still attending an African Pentecostal church in Guangzhou and praying that one day her husband would come back. Since she is not officially married, her son does not have *hukou*. Esther is reluctant to register as a single parent because of the tremendous pressure of living as a single parent in China.

While Vivian and Esther operate their businesses mainly in Guangzhou, Lily represents a small number of Chinese women who followed their husbands to Nigeria. Lily is 28 years old, from Hunan province. She has a college degree in finance and can speak English very well. Before meeting her husband, John, Lily ran a private training school in Guangzhou. The two met in 2006 via internet chatting. John often asked Lily for help whenever he needed translation in business negotiations. The two dated for six months and got married in China in 2007. The couple did not encounter serious obstacles in legalizing their marriage due to the relative ease of international travel for Africans before China tightened its immigration control in 2008. Lily told me she married John not only because he is honest and hardworking, but because she saw John's potential to become a successful business man. In December 2010, Lily visited John's family in Nigeria for the first time. Then she stayed and did business in Lagos for one year. She recalled, "When I first arrived, I just wanted to come and take a look. Then I found it is easier to do business here. So in 2011 I went back to China and settled everything there. I transferred all my properties and business to Lagos. The overall infrastructure here is not as good as China, but I stayed because of the huge market potential in Lagos."

While China's strict immigration control has severely limited the transnational mobility of some Nigerian husbands, it also created business opportunities for couples who have successfully legalized their marriages in China. With John's newly acquired transnational mobility capital, the family business started to take off. Lily explained to me their business strategy, "We have two shops and one office here in Lagos. I take orders from customers here. Then I order from China via the internet. My husband is in China most of the time, sourcing goods for his clients, confirming the orders I made. I stayed here because being a foreigner is a big advantage for me. The fact that my business is here, my property is here only increased my credibility in the eyes of African customers. They know I wouldn't take their money and run away. I have good credibility in this area and many people like to place orders with me." Unlike some Chinese wives who have a hard time adjusting to local food and culture, Lily seemed to be relatively well integrated into Nigerian society. She has no problem eating African food and often speaks fast in a high pitched voice. One Nigerian client who was sitting in Lily's shop told me, "She understands the African way."

Since the stories of interracial couples are highly varied, these three case studies only present a glimpse of some of the challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese/Nigerian couples. It is worth noting that the timing of marriage makes a great difference in the couples' mobility stories. Those who got married before 2008 generally had less difficulty in registering their marriage. Vivian and Esther encountered more obstacles because they tried to get married after 2008, when stringent immigration control rendered international travel extremely difficult for undocumented Nigerians. While Vivian emphasizes her personal sufferings during the long period of separation from Keith, Esther voiced a strong criticism of China's immigration policy. She said, "Our government needs to change. If an African has a family in China, they should give him visa and allow him to enter. If they commit some crime, it is okay for the government to deport them, but you can't blame all Africans simply for the bad behaviors of some." For women who have relatively fewer business experiences and enterprising spirit, such as Eric's wife and Esther, life can be rather difficult after the departure of the Nigerian husband. Depending on their personality

and business skill, Chinese wives in Lagos have displayed different levels of integration to local society. Several Chinese women I met still play an active role in the family business, but I also heard stories of women who experienced hardship and financial constraints. They tend to isolate themselves and avoid contact with more successful interracial couples.

Transnational mobility dreams and realities

In her research on Chinese exports to Africa, Haugen (2011) argues that a large proportion of Sino-African trade is undertaken by Chinese and African individual traders and family enterprises in the export of manufactured goods from China to Africa. Bodomo (2010) notes African traders' contribution to the Chinese economy by creating business and job opportunities for migrant workers from less developed areas in China. He proposes to view the African trading community in Guangzhou as an emerging bridge for strengthening Africa-China relations. I want to add that Chinese/Nigerian interracial couples in Guangzhou and Lagos are also functioning as active agents in maintaining vibrant transnational business and family networks between China and Africa. However, the positive contributions of small-scale businesses and individual African traders to Sino-African trade relations seem to be not sufficiently recognized by the Chinese state. In Guangzhou the local government's anti-illegal immigration campaign has posed considerable restrictions to the motility options of both documented and undocumented African migrants. For example, Castillo (2015) identifies precarity as a common theme in most narratives of African experiences in Guangzhou. This article complements Castillo's research by examining how precarity and uncertainty structures the daily lives of Chinese/Nigerian couples. It underscores the tension between individual mobility dreams and institutional constraints that hinder the conversion of motility capital into economic and social capital. While most couples in this research desire a transnational lifestyle that is commensurate with their trans-border business activities, only a small number of them can accomplish that dream.

The African diaspora in China also adds a racial dimension to issues of immigration control. As noted by Brady, "The rising foreign presence [in China] since the late 1970s has been a result of a deliberate state policy to utilize foreign technology and foreign investment to modernize China and to help the country establish a prominent position on the world stage" (Brady 2000, 946). This state-initiated transnational flow of capital and knowledge helped establish the privileged status of "foreign experts," who are generally associated with white Euro-Americans and are often considered as contributors to Chinese economy. In contrast, the recent trade migration from Africa to China represents what scholars call "low-end globalization" or "globalization from below," which mainly thrives where state regulation is weak (Mathews and Yang 2012). China's recent tightening of immigration control points to its effort to distinguish between different types of foreigners, yet it also runs the risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes against African migrants at the personal level. In Guangzhou while the local state's immigration control claims to target all foreigners, in practice the police tend to single out African migrants for visa and passport check. Most of the immigration raids in Guangzhou also occur in areas where African migrants are concentrated. The racialization of blackness in Guangzhou poses embarrassment to the Chinese state's official rhetoric of Sino-African friendship. Developed mainly out of the historical narrative of Sino-African solidarity in the Mao era, the current official state rhetoric of Sino-African friendship fails to address the new challenges faced by China's expansion in Africa and the recent African migration

to China. With the global circulation of western racial ideology, and the persistence of traditional Chinese esthetic preference for light skin, everyday racism against Africans will probably continue to grow.

Looking ahead, the transnational mobility dreams and practices of most Chinese/Nigerian couples are likely to be passed on to the next generation. Besides everyday racism, interracial couples also face institutional barriers to raising children in China. First of all, couples are subjected to the one-child policy if they want to register the baby as a Chinese citizen. Couples who wish to have a second child have to pay exorbitant fines to the government for violating the birth control policy. The second hurdle is the *hukou* system. Children born out of common law marriages remain technically undocumented and are not entitled to benefits reserved for Chinese citizens. Esther, whose son is undocumented, revealed to me that there are many Chinese/African children in Guangzhou who have no *hukou*. For couples who are legally married in China, the *hukou* system still poses a problem. Since children's *hukou* can only be inherited from the mother, children of migrant mothers cannot become residents in Guangzhou. This usually means more expensive tuition when attending local schools and extra expenses on medical insurance. These structural constraints, coupled with some Nigerians' lack of faith in China's education system, prompt some couples to make transnational plans for their children. When Vivian was pregnant with a second child, her husband Keith tried to arrange for her to give birth in Canada. When that plan failed, Keith shifted his focus to the first child. When I met the couple in Guangzhou in summer 2013, Keith told me that his first son would be educated in Australia.

It is hard to tell when Keith can realize his dream of sending his child to Australia, but the fact that he is actively envisioning such transnational projects speaks volumes of Chinese/Nigerian couples' ambivalent relationship with the Chinese nation-state. Various scholars have noted that migration is a multi-linear process that moves beyond binary oppositions such as home and destination, movement and settlement. Instead, it involves overlapping trade and social networks in multiple locations and the negotiation of identities and power relations on multiple scales (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Kalir 2013; Pieke 2004). The stories of Chinese/Nigerian couples challenge the division between internal and international migration in researching China's immigration policies. They also call for new analytical perspectives that move beyond the limits of the nation-state in examining grassroots transnational imaginaries, trade networks, and family strategies that are both constrained and empowered by changing political economic relations and migration regimes between China and Africa. For many Nigerian migrants, "illegal" residence in Guangzhou is just one special phase of their life for the purpose of capital accumulation. It enables them to maintain a transnational advantage over traders in Africa. For many Chinese wives, the future of their interracial family and business is closely tied to the future of China/Africa trade relations. It will take time to see the impact of mixed-heritage children on the transformation of Chinese society, but it is an issue that cannot be ignored by the Chinese state.

Acknowledgements

Research assistance from Kelechi Nwadike, Ekeji Christopher, Edum Chinedu Thomas, Aisha Kamulegeya, and Melissa Musonda is highly appreciated. Allen Xiao provided critical help for my research trip to Lagos. Rui Zhao helped me find literature on interracial marriages. An early draft of the paper was presented at the conference, "Mobility and Communities: Socio-Spatial Transformation in Chinese Cities," held in Hong Kong Baptist University, November 29–30, 2013. I thank the conference participants for their critical feedback. Comments from two anonymous reviewers also greatly improved this paper.

Funding

This project is funded by the Hong Kong Research Grant Council [HKBU 245512].

Notes

1. *hukou* means household registration in English. It is one of the major means for the Chinese state to control the movement of people between urban and rural areas.
2. These Nigerian men are not related to the fifteen Chinese females in any particular ways. I took care not to interview both the husband and wife in order to avoid getting involved in their domestic disputes.
3. To protect their privacy, all personal names in this paper are pseudonyms.
4. In August 2008, the Guangzhou government, in its attempt to control undocumented foreign migrants in the region, announced that foreigners would be included in the “floating population” category and were subjected to the rules and regulations for its management (Ju 2008).
5. <http://blog.foolsmountain.com/2009/10/21/lou-jing-racism-gone-wild/>, last accessed August 12, 2014.

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