

Global Intimacies: China and/in the Global South

IN RECENT YEARS, people all over the world have become ever more aware of being drawn into intimate — and unequal — relations with one another, whether through environmental crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, global economic commodity chains, violent conflicts, forced displacements, or political protests and social movements. This special issue features China's so-called rising presence as one of the key nodes in these global intimacies. The essays by Mei-Hua Chen and Hong-zen Wang, Sealing Cheng, and Wei Wei contribute new approaches to migrant intimacies across borders through their ethnographically rich analyses. Chen and Wang explore cross-border marriages and sex work between Taiwanese men and Mainland Chinese and southeast Asian women; Cheng investigates refugee marriages and the difficulties men from various African nations face in seeking asylum in Hong Kong; and Wei analyzes Mainland Chinese queer reproduction that uses transnational Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTS) to enable queer parents to have a genetic link with their children and to be more accepted in Chinese society. In his essay, Petrus Liu pushes us to move beyond the idea that a theory of gender construction traveled to China from the West and was wholly adopted there, instead demonstrating the complexities of gender theories in China in the age of the Beijing Consensus. Christina Yuen Zi Chung and Sasha Su-Ling Welland explore a broad range of artworks that critically reflect on China's efforts to create a China-centered global

trading network. Paul Amar offers a “deimperial queer analysis” of the all-time top-earning Chinese film, *Wolf Warrior 2*, illuminating how it both buttresses China’s extractive and militarized investments in African nations and manifests anti-imperialist and utopian impulses. Poems by Zhai Yongming and Xu Lizhi feature the gendered and sexualized precarity and violence of recent social transformations in China resulting from China’s intimate linkages with the global capitalist economy. Finally, Cai Yiping’s *News and Views* offers a nuanced engagement with the Chinese government’s formal proclamations on women’s rights.¹

In the first essay, “Flexible Intimacies in the Global Intimate Economy: Evidence from Taiwan’s Cross-Border Marriages,” Mei-Hua Chen and Hong-zen Wang demonstrate the fallacy of treating cross-border marriages and cross-border sex work as separate as well as grouping women dichotomously under one or the other set of practices. These two seemingly disparate categories are, in effect, produced by state immigration regulations and dominant intersectional discourses of gender, sexuality, and class. Rather than distinguishing between marriage migrants and economic migrants, or between real marriages and fake marriages, Chen and Wang demonstrate the overlapping means by which women from the Global South try to better their lives in what they call the global intimate economy—where the Global North appropriates the reproductive and intimate labor of women from the Global South. The authors develop the concept of “flexible intimacy” to highlight how migrant women treat marriage as an investment through which to improve their lives. They argue that many marriage migrants have economic motivations for cross-border marriage and that migrant sex workers, conversely, are often involved in intimate relationships. Chen and Wang focus their study on Taiwan, which they argue is economically part of the North but politically part of the South due to Mainland China’s “One China” policy, which has marginalized Taiwan in the international political arena. To assert its sovereignty, the Taiwanese government

1. These essays grew out of a Ford Foundation-funded series of workshops on China and/in the Global South: *The Central Role of Gender and Sexuality*, which took place in Beijing and also at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Thanks to the Ford Foundation grants, and especially Susie Jolly, Lisa Rofel and the authors have built a transnational network of scholars and activists addressing China’s transformed presence in the Global South.

strictly controls border crossings by migrant women from China and Southeast Asia yet simultaneously allows Taiwanese husbands to appropriate migrant women's intimate and reproductive labor. Both Taiwanese men and migrant women expect the exchange of money and labor in cross-border marriages, however they adopt very different intimate strategies to meet their expectations.

The second essay, Sealing Cheng's "Choreography of Masculinity: The Pursuit of Marriage by African Men in Forced Displacement in Hong Kong," examines the changes in embodied performances of masculinity in Hong Kong by asylum seekers from various African nations in the context of the vulnerability and marginalization of forced displacement. Hong Kong is currently a favored destination for asylum seekers, owing to a dramatic global increase in refugees, tightened borders in the United States and Europe, and Hong Kong's visa-free entry policy. Cheng situates the intimate encounters of African asylum-seeking men and Chinese women in Hong Kong within two broader contexts: increased encounters between China and Africa and Hong Kong's contested autonomy and identity following its 1997 return to China. Most migrant men experience a profound sense of emasculation as they struggle against the exclusionary forces of what Cheng calls the "racial-border regime." Because these men tend to embrace idealized roles of husband, father, and breadwinner, many experience an "existential dislocation" in Hong Kong that manifests as unending dependence and uncertainty. Drawing on six years of fieldwork, Cheng adopts feminist approaches to masculinity and dance theories of choreography to understand asylum-seeking men's agentive engagements with masculinity. Choreography, Cheng argues, is the creative act of setting the conditions for things to happen. Heteronormative marriage to a local woman is one of the few avenues these men have to pursue a legal existence in Hong Kong, including a work permit. Marriage to African men is not necessarily seen by Hong Kong women or their families as degrading in itself. Rather, the "asylum seeker" status and its associated socioeconomic disenfranchisement set in motion a negative chain reaction of perceptions about African men that renders such marriages objectionable and morally suspicious. Still, asylum-seeking men pursuing intimate relationships and marriages with local women are not only reclaiming their masculinity but also subverting the regulation of the heteronormative racial-border regime,

crafting one transgressive mode of future-making in their highly circumscribed lives.

The third essay related to global intimacies is a sociological analysis of how lesbians and gay men engage in the use of transnational assisted reproduction technologies (ARTs), especially gestational surrogacy, in the context of what is often called a global surrogacy “gayby” boom. In his essay, “Queering the Rise of China: Gay Parenthood, Transnational ARTs, and Dislocated Reproductive Rights,” Wei Wei contextualizes the recent marked increase in Chinese gay parenthood in relation to the “rise of China” and the emergence of transnational ARTs. Those who engage in this practice are middle class, exemplifying the cosmopolitanism of China’s increased wealth, even as only a small number of lesbians and gay men can afford to hire surrogates. The favored destinations for use of ARTs are the United States, especially California, where they are fully legal; Thailand, which is less expensive; and Eastern Europe, with its white population. While these gay parents believe it is only natural to desire children, they also seek a genetic link with their offspring, a Eurasian biological mixture for their children, and a normative family life that, they hope, will lead to greater acceptance in Chinese society. Wei argues that this increase in transnational gay parenthood highlights several contradictions within the rise of China. One is that Chinese consumers’ recent entry into the reproductive landscape of the global fertility service industry changes the usual North/South positions in providing or receiving such services. Another contradiction is that, on the one hand, the Chinese government disapproves of homosexuality and bans most discussion of it on the internet, but, on the other hand, the very rise of China has enabled some gay men and lesbians to engage in ARTs. A third contradiction is that while the rise of China arguably entails a historically weighted pride in being Chinese, the use of transnational ARTs is often about making babies who are partially white, thus reinforcing global racial hierarchies. Wei queers China’s ascendance by making non-normative sexuality central to the examination of ART processes.

The next essays in this special issue use deconstruction and cultural analysis to reflect on the complexities of China’s role in novel global intimacies. In “Thinking Gender in the Age of the Beijing Consensus,” Petrus Liu insists that gender, “in both Chinese and Anglophone theories, is a multiply constituted and internally contradictory notion the meanings of which vary according to contexts and political purposes.” Given

this complexity, Liu rejects the narrative that a theory of gender construction or gender consciousness invented in North America traveled to China in the 1980s and 1990s and replaced a Marxist feminist concept of gender equality. He argues, instead, that the varied understandings of gender adopted by Chinese academic feminists, NGO workers, and state actors have emerged from a “complex dialogue between Chinese and Anglo-American intellectual currents” mediated by “the Beijing Consensus,” including debates about China’s socialist legacy, market reforms, rural-urban divide, and efforts to develop an alternative to Washington-centered neoliberal capitalism. According to Liu, the Chinese state champions “equality between men and women” as a means to justify its leadership in the Global South, but it will not embrace “gender equality,” which might include transgender rights, same-sex marriage, reproductive freedom, battles against the policing of gender expression, and new configurations of family and kinship. In championing “equality between men and women,” Liu explains, the Chinese state reduces sex to gender, reduces gender to women, and reduces women to an index of capitalist development. Resisting this conflation of sex, gender, and development is crucial, Liu contends, for creating “an alternative politics that can nourish the possibilities of gendered life.”

Christina Yuen Zi Chung and Sasha Su-Ling Welland continue the analysis of China’s role in global intimacies in “Wandering Geographies: Aesthetic Practice along China’s Belt and Road Initiative.” The authors offer an intentionally “unruly” exploration of artworks that engage with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a development strategy designed to create a China-centered global trading network. Using materials that have been discarded — plastic bottles, socialist imagery, old books, cleaning product containers, and mineral processing waste — the artists featured in Chung and Welland’s essay illuminate gendered histories of domestic labor and care work, unearth hidden forms of production along global commodity chains, and “make visible that which gets hollowed out, hidden, and disappeared” as “the Global South does the work to make the North gleam.” By attending to the materiality and movement of bodies, things, resources, and ways of seeing, the featured artists destabilize dominant framings of China’s relationship to the Global North and the Global South, addressing questions such as: Is China of the Global South or does it exert influence upon the Global South? Does China perform global ascendance by “becoming North,” or by reimagining ties to

Asia, Africa, and Latin America? How does the Global North “as aspirational imaginary” reconfigure historical alignments of the Global South?

In “Insurgent African Intimacies in Pandemic Times: Deimperial Queer Logics of China’s New Global Family in *Wolf Warrior 2*,” Paul Amar offers a “deimperial queer analysis” of the 2017 blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2*, the top-earning Chinese film of all time and one of the fifty top-grossing films in the history of global cinema. The heroic “Wolf Warrior” is a rogue Chinese soldier who adventures through the Global South “to battle white mercenaries, corrupt Asian businessmen, and local pirates — all while saving Africa from a ravaging pandemic.” Identifying a profound structural tension between, on the one hand, China’s extractive and militarized forms of investment and domination in Africa and, on the other hand, its claims to anti-imperialist solidarity with Africans battling white supremacy and Northern imperialism, Amar argues that the figure of the Wolf Warrior has helped to resolve this tension and legitimize the People’s Republic of China during its period of “Stepping Out into the World.” At the same time, while acknowledging the film’s male-centrism and reliance on colonial tropes of race and gender subordination, Amar illuminates the film’s anti-imperialist and utopian impulses. Drawing on Third World feminism, the “Asia as Method” approach, and queer resignification practices inspired by slash and “boylove” fan-reading traditions, Amar reveals racialized homoeroticisms among Asian soldiers, white mercenaries, and Black pirates; “a non-Western, queer, globalist kinship structure that triangulates Asian, white, and Black”; a nonbiological family network achieved through adoptive intimacies and trans-generational and mixed race friendships; a vision of “feminist South-South solidarity”; and queer possibilities for China-Africa cooperation. Through his deimperial queer reading of *Wolf Warrior 2*, Amar renders visible a rich fabric of solidarities and resistances.

The poems in this issue reverberate with the themes of the essays centered on the intimate linkages of China with the global capitalist economy. Zhai Yongming’s poem “A Report on Underage Prostitutes” is a prose poem that describes the experiences of a twelve-year-old sex worker through the skimming gaze of a newspaper reader on the news item about this girl/young woman. The reader observes how the item merely glosses over her story and gets buried among the overload of other news that “control our delights as consumers.” We must read Xu Lizhi’s poem, “I Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron,” on working

in horrendous factory conditions in China in light of his suicide at the age of 24, along with seventeen other workers at Foxconn. Foxconn is an intermediary company that links United States and other transnational corporations with factories in China.

Cai Yiping's News and Views piece, "What Do Gender Equality and Women's Rights Have to Do with China's Global Engagement?" is a nuanced engagement with the Chinese government's formal proclamations on women's rights in such forums as the United Nations. As a researcher, NGO activist, and most recently an executive committee member of the Global South NGO Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Cai has been engaged in the aftermath of the historic 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing. DAWN and other international feminist groups continue to advocate for the recognition and inclusion of gender equality and women's human rights language, especially reproductive and sexual health and rights, in the complex context of shifting geopolitics and polarized positions between countries who support this agenda and those who oppose it. Cai delineates two potentially contradictory positions China currently holds with regard to gender in international arenas: one is to promote China as a model for gender equality, a position that Cai describes as "telling good Chinese stories" about women and girls' development in China, accompanied by substantial Chinese donations to UN Women initiatives and aid for women and children in developing countries. The other position is to not give as much attention to gender equality when compared to China's active role in a host of other issues, such as climate change, trade, and security. Cai characterizes this latter approach as the cornerstone of China's foreign policy—the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Cai neither fully condemns nor simply praises China's official positions on gender equality. She concludes that while much progress has been made at the national level in China (after all, "equality between men and women" has been enshrined in the Chinese Constitution since 1954), "China's proactive and constructive impact on issues of gender equality and women's empowerment will be a substantive step to test its positive impact on global governance."

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