

Chinese Transnational Families

Care Circulation and Children's Life Paths

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Conclusions

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Conclusions

Based on qualitative data, this research has offered insights into care in these families through two different but interconnected and interdependent phenomena which had not been addressed by previous research: care circulation in Qingtianese transnational families and the life paths taken by these families' children. The exploration of the first of these phenomena served as the foundation for examining the second, with care, in its multiple dimensions and timescales – past, present and future – as the unifying thread. Baldassar and Merla's (2014a) 'care circulation' framework defines the circulation of care as the 'reciprocal, multi-directional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks subject to the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of both sending and receiving societies' (p. 25). Some meaningful conclusions can be extracted by looking at the first part of this book as a whole:

- 1 Hegemonic nuclear family model, tailored as it is to the Global North, is inadequate for describing the realities of these families. The families in the sample were extended, in both a horizontal and a vertical sense. The number of four-generation families is also important. The widespread presence of great-grandparents points to their presumable existence in other social settings, despite their broad absence from the literature on transnational families (for exceptions, see King et al., 2014).
- 2 These families engage in care-related mobility on various occasions, in order to offer or receive physically co-present care, resulting in the intersection of care strategies with new and old migratory processes. Transnational grandparenting, either with the grandparents moving to Spain or with the grandchildren moving to China, is a key component of this mobility. Care-related mobility is also instigated by situations such as illness (long-term or intermittent mobility), deaths, festivals and family events (short-term mobility) (Lamas-Abraira, 2019), this demonstrates that reasons to move go beyond economic pull factors, care being a key factor (Baldassar, 2007). Nevertheless, economic resources enable

or constrain the capability to move. Furthermore, care in its multiple dimensions (domestic, hands-on care and supervision, emotional and moral care, practical care, material care and family-social care)¹ can be exchanged at a distance or through proxy-caring practices (Baldassar, 2008; Baldassar & Merla, 2014a; Kilkey & Merla, 2014).

- 3 Proxy-caring practices, in which physically co-present care is delegated to another person, is widely used for the ageing or frail family members living in Qingtian, where *ayis* (阿姨), or hired female caregivers are common. While the original link between care and *xiao* (孝), or filial piety – a Confucian code which prescribes the normative intra-family relationships and duties – centres on physically co-present care, the sub-contracting of care in this way is socially accepted and perceived as constitutive of a filial attitude (Lan, 2002). In contrast, institutional care continues to be equated with abandonment, and families in the sample practically and discursively refuse this kind of care arrangement. The ongoing construction of a huge nursing home in Qingtian city may challenge this view, and time will tell if reality corresponds to such ideals, or whether care for ageing family members will become a commodity (Coe, 2017; DeSilva, 2018).
- 4 The meaning of care extends beyond its ideal form, which is linked to proximity (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a). New media – and particularly the WeChat app – are key for enabling families to function through care monitoring and management at a distance, as well as by facilitating multiple forms of interaction across borders. The action of giving a ‘like’ to other family members’ posts is perceived as a ‘caring about’ attitude, which connects different generations and forms part of new intergenerational spaces in which to deploy emotional care. The field-work has also revealed a broader meaning of care through its social dimension. In the transnational space in which these families participate, displaying care becomes a sort of social imperative that prevents individuals and their kin from engaging in gossip and criticism, which may result in a lowering of status or losing face² (Lamas-Abraira, 2019).
- 5 Similarly, avoiding behaviour that is considered improper, non-normative or undesirable in the family and/or social sphere – such as divorce or addictions – also becomes a form of care, by following the filial piety prescription to honour the family’s name (Lam, 2006). It is important not only to care, but also to display care in socially accepted forms (Baldassar, 2007; Soto, 1989). Social control operates transnationally, according to expectations based on the Chinese culture system and the premise of individual/family interdependence. Nevertheless, the degree and forms of control change over time and this control also affects the diverse family actors differently, weighing much less heavily on the younger family members who have been socialised in Spain.

- 6 Research has generally expected support to flow from the so-called destination countries to the family's countries of origin, and from the migrants to the stayers (Boccagni, 2015; Zhou, 2013), this view having been strongly influenced by the earlier literature's emphasis on economic remittances and the ethnocentric and paternalist approach often taken in migration research. Nevertheless, in this ethnography, care – in its multiple dimensions – is documented to flow from Spain to China and from China to Spain, as well as from Spain to Spain, China to China, and to and from third countries. Overall, the conjoint articulation of the various flows of care – and its different dimensions – is essential for securing families' social reproduction, with the extended family playing a key role in this process (Zhou, 2013).
- 7 According to informants' accounts, care exchanges within these families are anchored in three different types of reciprocity. Practical reciprocity emanates from specific care needs, which are met through the support provided by another person, according to a pragmatic logic and carrying a virtual expectation of repayment, whether this is symmetrical or asymmetrical. Normative reciprocity is derived from filial piety prescriptions, associated with Chinese families' care cycle, which link certain family roles to care duties, incorporating a deferred and inter-generational repayment mechanism. Finally, offset reciprocity is based not on practical needs or cultural prescriptions but on personal ties and the idea of caring about someone, not as a duty or repayment but due to a desire or a natural impulse. None of these types of reciprocity are exclusive, meaning that they may overlap or appear intermittently along the life course. In a similar vein, through these multiple intersections, the roles of caregiver and care receiver are also fluid (Gherghel & Le-Gall, 2010; Kilkey & Merla, 2014) and individuals may switch from one to another of these poles or take on both roles simultaneously.
- 8 The hierarchies of age, generation and gender inherited from Confucian tradition have become more flexible, but continue to have a significant influence upon care expectations and duties in these families. This is particularly true when it comes to gender. However, the transnational context provides additional spaces in which women of the mothers' generation (2G) may challenge their in-law care roles. Moreover, through their entrepreneurial activity in Spain, these women are partially freed from the work associated with their reproductive role, while such activity also serves to increase their status within their families (Sáiz López, 2012). Despite all, reproductive care burdens are not distributed horizontally, but displaced to other female relatives, including adolescent daughters and, most frequently, grandmothers (Liu, 2016; Shen, 2011). That care work³ is constructed in a gendered way, reinforced by the fact that all the care workers hired by the families in this

ethnography, in China and Spain, are female. As a result, care work is articulated through a network of women (Carrasco et al., 2011; Ho, 1999; Lamas-Abraira, 2021), while men retain the role of helpers and take on the social dimension of care, which is linked to family prestige. Moreover, gender is a key explanatory factor when it comes to disadvantaged social positions, particularly when linked to other factors such as age or social class, these circumstances serving to question an idealised view of care circulation in these families.

- 9 The active and extensive caregiving role of the grandparents' generation – and even that of the great-grandparents, through their supervision of children – challenges the age-related stereotypes that hold these generations to be inactive, dependant or a burden. It demonstrates that presuming a direct correlation between age and a care-receiving role is problematic and moreover, that stigmatising labels such as 'the elderly' serve to homogenise a large, heterogeneous group of people and thereby to make them invisible (Lamas-Abraira, 2019). The assumption that care automatically flows from the younger to the older generations (Baldassar, 2007) and from the state to them is proved unfounded in these families. Instead, care flows in multiple directions and across generations.

To varying degrees, different individual and family preferences serve to sketch out their 'desired geographies of family life' (Bonizzoni, 2012, p. 168), and through their agency, they are able to shape care arrangements and how care circulates, to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the different institutional contexts in Spain, Europe and China shape this circulation, particularly affecting the ability of transnational families' different members to participate in it. By applying Kilkey and Merla's (2014) 'situated transnationalism' framework⁴ to this research, migratory and working-time regimes have been found to be particularly important for the families in this ethnography.

In summary, in Qingtianese transnational families, care – in its multiple forms – circulates within the extended-family network and beyond (through proxy-caring practices and care's social dimension), and 'over time as well as distance' (Baldassar & Merla, 2014b, p. 7), including mainly – but not only – China and Spain. While such care circulation, in which support flows in multiple directions, serves to optimise family resources and minimise the costs associated with social reproduction, not all individuals benefit from it to the same degree, nor are all of them allocated the same burdens. How care circulates locally and transnationally is shaped by: the family's socio-economic status, linked mainly to the migration project; the Chinese culture system, determining care roles, duties and social control; and the various Spanish, European and Chinese institutional regimes. All of these factors

also determine the extent to which different individuals benefit or are disadvantaged by this circulation of care, these contexts and circumstances being differentially permeable and susceptible to change.

Building upon this background of care circulation, the second part of this book explored the experiences of these families' children, with children understood as the family's youngest generation, from their early years to the stage at which they are young adults without descendants. From their accounts, several points can be made:

- 1 Their early life experiences can be divided into a dual structure, according to their physical presence in a specific spatial setting: either in China or in Spain. In both countries, a salient feature was the role of grandparents as the main caregivers. When care arrangements within the family were not available, the young migrant couples in Spain often contracted care so as to be able to cope with productive and reproductive demands (Sáiz López, 2012). Within the sample, care was delegated to different degrees: from occasional help to daily care or a child's relocation to a Spanish family household. Childcare arrangements inside and/or outside the family realm occur simultaneously or sequentially, depending on specific care needs and available resources, particularly social and economic capital.
- 2 In both Qingtian and Spain, cases of informal child circulation or 'the relocation of a child or young person into a new household for locally meaningful reasons' (Fonseca in Leinaweaver, 2007, p. 164) were documented, implying an extension of local practices to the transnational context. The relocation took place within and outside the kin network, in most cases serving to strength and/or to create ties through a process of relatedness⁵ (Carsten, 2000; Leinaweaver, 2007, 2010). Nevertheless, the nature and degree of this process varies in each case.
- 3 Those informants who were partially raised in China generally experienced family reunification in Spain when they were between four and seven years old. Once there, they had to start a new life in a new context, meet their parents – who were usually unfamiliar to them – make new friends and learn a new language. Together with the age of reunification in Spain (being older brought additional difficulties in adapting to the new social context), the period in which the child lived in China and the family's economic status – both of which affected their ability to interact across borders – were key in shaping children's perceptions of these transnational experiences.
- 4 While still representing a minority, an emerging pattern of minors staying in China as adolescents has been documented. Their present-day accounts and preferences, together with their lifestyle and living conditions, challenge the left-behind discourse (Pantea, 2011), which assumes

that the minors living in this kind of transnational arrangement are automatically disadvantaged. Within a child-centred family model, they are positioned not as abandoned children but rather, as a kind of aristocracy among transnational families, while their families' socio-economic condition also grants them a privileged status within the local social context. While not seeking to generalise, nor to diminish or to underestimate the emotional struggles which may result from some of these experiences, this research posits the need to situate and analyse care practices and arrangements in context, including the structural and institutional constraints which shape families' capabilities and choices. It is vital to avoid privileging hegemonic models of childhood and family, taking into account not only the negative but also the positive outcomes of specific care arrangements, as well as their first-person accounts (Shepler, 2011; Rae-Espinoza, 2011).

- 5 Based on these accounts, their adolescence in Spain is characterised by a triple articulation of difference (Lamas-Abraira, 2021). On a social level, all informants have been marked as different by others, due to their phenotypic features. The perception of being different was also reinforced within the family sphere. On the one hand, their parents' emphasis upon difference reflects a protective attitude, as they seek to fight and overcome what the parents perceive as a disadvantaged position in Spanish society, on the basis of their own experience. On the other hand, their parents and other kin often complain about them being 'too Spanish'. Finally, there is also a self-perceived difference that arises as a result of comparing their own way of acting and that of their parents, and their own families' practices, attitudes and behaviour with those of their non-Chinese peers. The problems they experienced were connected to their ethnicity and, more specifically, how other people reacted to it. As such, erasing their ethnic markers was perceived as a solution, resulting in a rejection of their Chineseness during this stage.
- 6 Minor's supposed naturally dependent condition is contradicted by the informant's retrospective accounts, which suggest that they have been active agents who have engaged in an important, multidimensional role as family caregivers since early adolescence. The care they provided was intergenerational and/or intragenerational, flowing horizontally and vertically, and forming part of the family 'care continuum' (Bauer, 2016; Becker, 2007), in which various family members and family generations participated. As 'cultural brokers' (Bauer, 2016; Menjivar, 2006), they took on interpreting and translation tasks from early childhood onwards; furthermore, as adolescents, they became responsible for managing various formalities for the family, taking on the role of tutors, advocates or surrogate parents in different circumstances (Valenzuela, 1999). Moreover, they refer to helping regularly in the family business

since early adolescence and/or taking on housework and care of younger siblings, the latter being a more common role for girls. The informants who had to take on tasks that are considered adult duties when they were minors (Becker, 2007; Menjivar, 2006) reflected positively on these experiences as young adults. They think that such experiences have served them to learn about the value of autonomy, cooperation and effort, and, generally, to become mature at an early age – particularly in comparison with their non-Chinese peers – resulting in a sense of pride and connection to their family (Fuligni, 2006). As Olwig (1999) suggests, children's experiences of making contributions to their families must be understood within specific contexts.

- 7 Regarding generational succession, all the informants plan to have children, and certain care-related issues are key to their expectations about being future mothers and fathers. Their discourse about themselves as future parents incorporates an element of generational opposition and a harsh critical dimension, based on a moral-temporal dichotomy: the thoughts, attitudes and care practices of their parents as erroneous, obsolete or improvable and located in the past; and their own, aligning with normative models in Spain, as corresponding to a corrective or amendable future. Moreover, they do not conceive child-care as a collective and shared responsibility, as local conceptions in Qingtian. As a result, there is an ongoing change, not only in these families' care arrangement patterns and expectations but also in what family means for young adult descendants of migrants, in contrast to their ascendants. However, the resources and – economic, social and cultural – capital available to the two generations at the same life stage are very different; as such, care strategies and ideals must be understood in context.
- 8 The identities constructed and asserted by informants are highly heterogeneous, but as young adults, they state that they fit better in Spanish society than in China nowadays. Nevertheless, due to their status as children who grew up in a transnational family, they are subject to a double process of 'foreignisation'. While in Spain, they often have to deal with racist attitudes, they are not perceived as natives and they are ascribed a never-ending – and usually unreal – migrant status. While in Qingtian, their language skills, accent, style and appearance, gestures and behaviour become clear markers that they are not 'Chinese-Chinese' people – in their words – that is, they stand out as Chinese people who were socialised abroad and are somewhat lacking in hegemonic 'Chineseness'.
- 9 Families' social mobility and the ongoing development and affordability of transportation and communication technologies promote an increasing degree of transnationalism and the existence of new dynamics

in the social transnational space for the younger ones within the sample. Nevertheless, the nature of their transnational ties differs from that of their parents and other ascendant kin (Gardner, 2012; Levitt, 2009), most of their ties being friends spread across various countries which have Qingtian as a common leisure and holiday destination, generating new dynamics, such as group trips.

This second part of this book has taken a life course perspective that looks beyond specific roles, transitions or life stages to explore informants' past, present and future accounts. By doing so, it has been possible to provide a non-fragmented and coherent narrative about how informants have experienced a range of changing care arrangements, and family and social positions, as they have advanced along their life paths.

Taken as a whole, this book takes an alternative, novel and meaningful approach to integrated research on transnational families and children's life paths, in which care is the unifying thread. Care is the core concept, as it permeates people's lives (Fisher & Tronto, 1990) and traverses society generationally. Within the whole and through its parts, care is simultaneously a resource which circulates, enabling social reproduction, and a moral and coercive background 'of the good and of duty' (Durkheim, 1982, p. 47), which informs various family and individual dynamics. Whether as a social fact (Durkheim, 1982) or as a shared consciousness of 'beliefs, tendencies and practices' (p. 54) which differ from their individual forms, there is a need to look beyond the specific manifestations of care, to the broader context of which they form a part and which sustains them. As a result, exploring care – as a part – has served to describe how the wider Qingtian-Spain transnational social space functions – as a whole. This is a space in factors such as gender, class, age, generation and the place of socialisation, have shown themselves to be essential categories for understanding most of the phenomena addressed in this book: including the meanings of family and care, social prestige and identity, as well as the nature and degree of transnational ties.

Notes

- 1 Based on Finch and Mason's (1993) care categories (hands-on care, emotional and moral care, practical care, financial and housing support), which were re-deployed by Baldassar and Merla (2014) in the care circulation framework. In this research, they have been reorganised and complemented with additional dimensions, based on fieldwork accounts.
- 2 In Chinese, *mianzi*/面子 (face) refers to notions of status and prestige and is essential for the functioning of social relations in China: 'Saving *mianzi* is a shortcut by Chinese to build their network and tapping into other's social resources' (Buckley et al., 2006, p. 276).

- 3 In this book, 'care work' refers to the set of care activities that, besides additional demands such as mental planning, involves a large degree of physical effort and extensive and regular dedication, such as hands-on care (feeding, washing bodies, dressing, etc.) and domestic tasks.
- 4 Which includes the following institutional regimes: migratory, welfare, work, gender and transport and means of communication (Kilkey & Merla, 2014).
- 5 Carsten (2000) proposed studying kinship through 'relatedness' in specific contexts, by focusing on local meanings and moving 'away from the pre-given analytic opposition between the biological and the social on which much anthropological study of kinship has rested' (p. 4), by emphasising the small, everyday actions that create ties among people.