



COMMENTARY

Absentee fathers, left-behind wives and “ghost babies”: Interracial romance and Afro-Chinese families¹

Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo 

Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Correspondence: Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
E-mail: oluwatoyinkudus@gmail.com

The sharp rise in research on Africans in China over the last two decades demonstrates the centrality of migration in understanding dynamics in Africa–China relations. This recent growth of scholarly literature on African mobility and settlement in Chinese cities, particularly in Guangzhou City, can be linked to the initial media fascination with black bodies that have gradually dotted streets which were, for a long time, unique for their homogenous Chinese population and conspicuous absence of significant foreigners. More Africans are permanently migrating into Guangzhou and this has occasioned interracial romance and marriage. Unfortunately, Afro-Chinese romance and family formation face a myriad of challenges, many of which have been discussed in the literature (Adebayo & Omololu, 2020; Lan, 2015; Zhou, 2017). This commentary lays out the challenges of family separation as a key aspect of the challenges facing Afro-Chinese family using the examples of Nigerian men who marry Chinese women. I contend that family separation is driven by the contexts of “illegality” and deportation, as well as institutional disregard for the realities of Afro-Chinese union and its implications for China.

As China opened up to the outside world in the 1970 s, marriages between Chinese citizens and foreigners began to rise (Pan, 2014). For the most part, however, the Chinese in China married Overseas Chinese and the nationals of wealthy countries in Asia, Europe, North America and Australia. Romantic relationships between African men and Chinese women were rare. This only began to change as commercial cities like Guangzhou became both magnets for Africans, and a melting port for more intense and romantic interactions between African men and Chinese women (Lan, 2015). Our understanding of the extent of Afro-Chinese romantic relationships and the number of marriages arising from it is plagued by data unavailability. Nonetheless, the reality and growing significance of such unions are not in doubt. To be sure, Afro-Chinese romantic relationships have been publicly scrutinized in recent years (Pfafman, Carpenter, & Tang, 2015; Wing-Fai, 2015). Also, studies focusing on such relationships have identified a long list of challenges confronting Afro-Chinese couples in China. These impediments are simultaneously structural, institutional and cultural in nature (Adebayo & Omololu, 2020; Haugen, 2012; Zhou, 2017). Rarely discussed, though, is the context of family separation and how this challenge is being driven by the construction and management of “illegality”, deportation, and disregard for Afro-Chinese family formation and future in China.

¹Afro-Chinese family refers to African and Chinese couples who have children together but may or may not be legally married in China.

In the past three years, I have interviewed over 40 Nigerian men in the city of Guangzhou, including seven men who married Chinese women. Lack of proper documentation appears to be one of the major challenges facing Nigerians. It is not unusual to meet migrants who have lived in the city for close to a decade without valid immigration papers. Haugen's (2012) pioneering research into the enormity of undocumentedness in the Nigerian community finely lays out the complexity of this challenge, especially how the condition renders many of them immobile and vulnerable to deportability. Like other members of the Nigerian community, therefore, some Nigerian men who have children with Chinese women are also at the risk of deportation.

Data needed to gauge the extent of deportation is not available but conversations with community leaders indicated that the deportation of Nigerians occurs regularly, particularly among those who are in breach of the dreaded *san fei* or "triple illegal" rules – that is illegal entry, illegal work and illegal stay in China. Those deported for breaching the immigration rules risk being without their families. Specifically, those who have been apprehended and deported for breaking the *san fei* rule end up being banned from re-entering China for several years. Moreover, those who have not been deported but are still at the risk of deportation are constrained to employ strategies of partnership/union regularization that may lead to further complications. For example, in a bid to make their stay in the city more permanent, married over-stayers invest on an exit strategy that involves procuring false travel documents to leave China. Their plan is to re-enter China with "fresh" travel documents. Some may even save enough funds to sponsor their would-be wives to Nigeria for marriage and start the process of obtaining marriage visa from one of the Chinese embassies in Nigerian cities. Upon arriving in China, however, some of these men are detected, re-deported and handed stricter travel bans. In both scenarios, unless the husbands find a way to raise funds to bring their wives and families to Nigeria, with a clear strategy on how to socially and economically support all of them, deportation-induced separation can linger for long and even become permanent.

Beyond the family separation, however, the deportation of Nigerian fathers affects the Chinese wives and the mixed-race children that are left behind in China. Being mostly internal migrants themselves, some Chinese spouses find it difficult to raise children on their own. While confronted by their personal day-to-day stigmatization as members of the "floating population" and facing limited socioeconomic opportunities in the city, they feel alone in raising their children who share physical resemblance with their African fathers. In the past, some Chinese netizens – or online citizens – have condemned Afro-Chinese children who have the physical features of the Africans. They regard their physical appearance as a taboo and the relationship which produced them as impure libidinous incursions on Chineseness by the Africans (Wing-Fai, 2015). What is more, some of the women have married an African/black person without the blessings of their parents. Because of this, they are unable to tap into the social capital of family support which is historically a major pillar of childcare in the Chinese society. A Nigerian community leader informed me that, as result of these challenges, some women are under pressure to abandon their children while some others with close links in the Nigerian community place them under the foster care of some other Nigerian families. Such an arrangement allows mixed-race children enjoy a semblance of a home environment within which they can grow and develop a sense of belonging and identity – be it Afro-Chinese or otherwise. Despite this, some of these children are still perceived as "ghost babies" because their parent never married officially and are, therefore, unable to legally register them as citizens.

Apart from coping with everyday racism and the risk of deportation associated with undocumentedness that Nigerian-Chinese couples face, Nigerian-Chinese couples who are legally married can be kept separated for an extended period by certain state practices. A great instance of this is what is currently happening to a few Nigerian men who have been stuck in Nigeria following the international travel restrictions imposed on foreigners to prevent further imported Covid-19 cases to China. Fred, a Nigerian man, told me that he has been separated from his family for close to one year. He had visited his hometown in December 2019 as part of the yearly ritual of return among Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria. During our discussion, he informed that, he has no idea when he will be able to reunite with his family in Guangzhou owing to the flight restriction imposed by China against foreigners. With his wife quitting her job after the birth of their second son and without anyone to support with caregiving at home, he worries always about the state of things. His stuckedness in Nigeria also means that he must earn in Naira to take care of the needs of his family in Renminbi, while he is at time expected to provide for family members in Nigeria.

Moreover, in recent months, his children have focused less and less on their regular video call sessions together. According to him, whenever he thinks about the year-long separation from his family, he feels unwanted in China.

It is unclear whether the deportation of Nigerian spouses and state practice that separate them from their Chinese wives and interracial children are part of a much broader strategy aimed at discouraging Afro-Chinese marriages. Nonetheless, by locking out Fred and deporting Nigerian fathers who married Chinese women, the consequences of family separation on wives and children seem to have been lost on the authorities in China. Family separation is a double-edged sword which hurts African men and do damage to those left behind, including China's own citizens. Moreover, the phenomenon will affect children's development in a society that, perhaps, does not want them. The children will grow with this condition while accept it as cultural exclusion. Bonding with their African fathers at early age can be critical for the social and cultural adjustments of interracial children within an environment where mixedness is still largely considered uncomfortable and inappropriate in the popular imaginations of many everyday Chinese people. Also, the blockade of African men with interracial families as a part of the Covid-19 pandemic response when diasporic Chinese, known to have contributed to the spike in imported cases, are excused on the ground of family attachment raises concern about the institutional disregard for Afro-Chinese families and their capacity to change or rupture how Chineseness is perceived in the future. Lastly, there is a point to be made about Afro-Chinese children: whether they are recognized officially or discarded as non-Chinese, China must surely face the seriousness of their presence together with its outcomes; if not right now, in the future.

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ORCID

Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3746-4963>

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