

## Article

# Conflicts in Intergenerational Relationships and Patterns of Coordination among Chinese–African Families in Guangzhou

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**Abstract:** Through case studies of Chinese–African couples living together with Chinese parents, this paper examines conflict coordination within intergenerational relationships in the same living environment. Among intergenerational families living in China and Africa, intergenerational differences as well as family relationship issues are sometimes inevitable. In addition, different families employ varying methods in order to alleviate intergenerational tension and maintain harmony within the family. Through fieldwork, it was found that there are three types of intergenerational relations: regulation by an intermediary, formal democracy, and excessive participation. Although all three models attempt to balance intergenerational voices and decision-making power, the first two models are generally present in relatively stable family relationships, while the last model consists of relatively negative aspects that actually add fuel to the fire when family conflicts arise. Although young Chinese–African couples and elderly Chinese parents expect family relations to function well, the contradictions brought about by power imbalances not only hurt the parent–child relationship, but more importantly affect the intimate marriage relationship and the upbringing of the children.

**Keywords:** intergenerational cohabitation of Chinese–African families; intergenerational relationships; parent–child relationships; filial piety



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## 1. Introduction

The number of foreigners traveling, studying, and working in China has increased significantly in recent years. According to data from the United Nations on international migration, the number of foreigners moving to China increased by 126,000 from 2010 to 2019. Furthermore, according to data from the country's seventh census, as of 1 November 2020, there were nearly 84,600 foreigners living in China (National Bureau of Statistics 2021). The complexity in terms of nationality, occupation, and reason for entering the country is ever increasing. This coupled with the rising frequency of cross-border movements and social interaction between different ethnic groups has increased the complexity of expatriate management. As a result, there has been a significant impact on the reshaping of social space (Pan 2015). In one respect, this phenomenon reflects China's rising national strength. At the same time, it poses a serious challenge to China's social governance and China's ability to reasonably deal with the phenomenon of cross-border marriage. This, in addition to the migration of foreigners to China, will affect the country's domestic social order as well as its image in the world. This is particularly crucial today as China actively participates in global governance and advocates for the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind. Currently, only a small number of studies have involved cross-border marriages between Chinese and African nationals. Instead, research has primarily focused on cross-border trade, social adaptation, social prejudice, and community governance of Africans in China. Bodomo (2012) spearheaded the analysis of the social adaptation of Africans in Guangzhou from a linguistic perspective. In addition, Haugen (2011, 2012, 2013, 2018) has published a host of articles pertaining to Sino-African transnational commerce and trade. Among them, "China as a Springboard for Africans

to Accumulate Wealth and Emigrate to Europe and the United States”, “The Cultural Adaptation of African Students”, and “China’s New Immigration Policy” have in recent years become indispensable for scholars in China researching Chinese–African studies. [Lan \(2017\)](#) further expanded on the aforementioned scholarly research, when he focused on the survival status and development path of Africans scattered across China. This involved the struggle of Nigerian–Chinese couples’ uphill climb to achieve socio-economic status. [Mathews et al. \(2017\)](#), as a scholar who has long studied Africans in China, demonstrated through long-term fieldwork that Africans use Hong Kong and Guangzhou as the core trade belt to transport goods to the world, forming a global low-end transnational trade chain and thus impacting China–Africa relations. [Castillo \(2021\)](#) expanded on this aspect and focused on the transnational commerce of Africans and the process by which they build a sense of belonging in a fluid transnational space.

In 2008, 2009, and 2012, Li Zhigang’s team were the first to put a spotlight on Africans living in Guangzhou when they published articles on the impact of the formation of a “Chocolate City” in which local security, regional government, and planning within the ethnic and economic enclaves of Africans in Guangdong were all potentially affected ([Lyons et al. 2012](#); [Li et al. 2008](#); [Li et al. 2009](#); [Li and Du 2012](#)). Subsequently, Li Zhigang was able to bring together both domestic and foreign scholars in order to publish “The Spatial Landscape of Guangzhou’s International Settlement Area” ([Li 2016](#)), which triggered a wide range of discussions on the African population in China. [Xu \(2012\)](#) argues that although African nationals have left their homeland, they have been adept at restructuring their social support networks by strengthening relationships with relatives and friends in Guangzhou as well as through joining informal social groups. Due to statistical difficulties brought about by the fragmentation of Africans and issues pertaining to anonymity, [Liang \(2013\)](#) used the RDS (respondent-driven sampling) method in order to survey African groups. This undoubtedly contributed to the ability and effectiveness to study the overall pattern of the African respondents. [Niu \(2015\)](#) explored the “passer-by” identity of Africans in Guangzhou in which Africans identify internally as a temporary resident group. External interaction with other groups and the formation of dialogue with grass-roots governments along with this “passer-by identity” triggers an air of informal, imperfect, and unstable operations within African communities. This in turn defines the African migrants as a “passer-by community”. Only a small number of studies, such as those conducted by [Zhou and Li \(2016\)](#), have explored the immigration management and legal status problems encountered by Chinese and African couples attempting to adapt to Chinese society. Those studies have conducted extensive fieldwork and explored various practical issues such as the difficulty of Chinese–African children’s ability to adapt due to the household registration system. Still, a large number of studies primarily focus on the analysis of problems faced by local governments, from the perspectives of regional planning, community governance, and gender relations, in the management of foreign populations. Those studies do not delve into cross-border marriage patterns, family relations, or related social policies between China and Africa.

In summary, domestic and foreign research focuses on Africans’ global commerce and cross-border mobility, and although that research does in fact pertain to the cross-border marriage of Africans in Chinese and the identity of their children in China, most studies have not carried out holistic and systematic research. There are still many unknown areas to be studied and refined regarding cross-border marriage of Chinese–African families. For this reason, this paper will utilize field research to obtain first-hand information. Lastly, methods utilized by African–Chinese families in order to maintain family harmony as well as solve intergenerational conflicts are also researched.

## 2. Intergenerational Cohabitation and Family Power (Relations)

[Liang \(2020\)](#), [Wang \(2013\)](#), [Yao \(2012\)](#), [Ma et al. \(2011\)](#), and others believe that China’s family structure is changing and that it is geared toward a direction of a “Miniaturization of Family Size” and a “Centralization of the Family Structure”. Still, according to China’s

family dynamics tracking data from 2010, approximately 40% of urban married couples choose to live with their parents (Xu 2013). From this it can be surmised that it is still the norm for married children to live with their parents in China. This phenomenon stems from a lack of protection in China's current system as well as a series of problems, such as maternity insurance, preschool education, housing commercialization, as well as a series of other problems (Chen 2017). Especially now, China's elder care institutions are lackluster, and as a direct result some elderly people are dependent on their children for daily necessities, spiritual well-being, and financial support. Chinese families have always maintained a tradition of elder care, and children generally regard supporting the elderly as their obligation. In addition, living with one's parents is an important way to provide support to them (Wang 2014; Xu 2013). Children living with their parents help their parents in terms of elder care. Those same children are able to save on daily living expenses and rent while also receiving help from their parents in the form of shared housework, child rearing, etc., thus forming a "temporary backbone family" (Liu 2012; Shen 2013).

In China, living together across generations is mutually beneficial to the elderly and young alike as both sides are able to receive needed support. However, cohabitation also gives way to various complex intergenerational issues. Family members experience intergenerational conflicts, marital conflicts, or parent-child conflicts due to differences in personality, lifestyle habits, and daily behavior (Shi 2012). Even in trivial daily affairs, there are constant issues and differences between family members among different generations (Shen 2013). Chief among these conflicts are differences in social environments, which elucidate differences in intergenerational values and behaviors.

Due to a host of differences in manners, parenting styles, etc., any age gap between the grandparents and their children only serves to increase the discord within the family (Han et al. 2020). For example, although grandparents often participate in the upbringing of their grandchildren, the parents of those children often have differing opinions when it comes to the methods used by those grandparents in disciplining their children. This then leads to family conflict (Goh and Kuczynski 2010). Furthermore, the number of people living in a single family unit has increased and now includes multiple generations. Now, a multitude of relationships, including husband and wife, parent-child, as well as intergenerational, all need to be managed. Moreover, the intimate relationships between grandparents, fathers, and grandchildren, and the competition for family power positions are extremely delicate (Shen 2013). Third, in a market-based environment, the differences among family members are more complex and challenging. In one respect, the meeting of various needs of urban households is increasingly dependent on market-oriented services. Differences in lifestyles, values, and responses to action between generations are even more polarized in the face of market-based choices (Liu 2016). Young people want to be independent and wish to outsource as many of their daily necessities and chores to others as possible. This is in stark contrast to the elderly who believe that young people are overly dependent on services offered in the marketplace (Shi 2016). At the same time, the family is becoming increasingly "privatized" (Yang 2003) and "individualized" (Shen 2019), and the adjustment methods of a national or collective nature (e.g., units) are increasingly withdrawn and transferred to market regulation, and external sharing institutions, such as nursery schools, nursing homes, and housekeeping companies, which all pose far greater challenges to family economic capital. In order to cope with a lack of financial support for the family and the difficulty of obtaining effective market services, young people are forced to rely on the help and support of their parents. As a part of this, young people often invite their parents to either come live with them and join their own small families, or they go to live with their parents, thus forming a cross-generational family pattern and subsequently exposing the problem of maintaining a harmonious relationship.

Some scholars in China believe that during the process of intergenerational cohabitation, a portion of elderly people will choose to obtain a harmonious living situation with their children by way of ceding power (Shen 2013; Xia 2015). Still, other families will choose to use any and all close emotional bonds in order to resolve issues. Young

couples, while meeting the expectations (xiaoshun) of the elderly, persuade the elderly to give up their right to speak in family affairs (Xiao 2014). The aforementioned family intergenerational relationship model focuses on two important dimensions: emotion and power, which have both been valuable and integral aspects in the research of this paper. In addition, with Guangzhou as an example, Liang (2020) found through quantitative analysis that over the past two decades, the elderly in Guangzhou believe that living with their children and grandchildren is the optimal choice for their later years in life, but do admit to sometimes having doubts. Although the data pertaining to cross-generation cohabitation in Guangzhou declined from a high of more than 75% in 1998 to 61.73% in 2017, in fact the cohabitation rate converged with the national data, and showed that more than one-third of adult children lived with elderly parents. These data are also used in this paper in order to further illustrate cross-border marriage and family.

At present, there is very little research on family relations between Chinese and Africans. Furthermore, there is no research on intergenerational relations between Chinese and African families and their intergenerational living situations. This paper will investigate how those relationships are maintained as well as how any and all issues are addressed on a daily basis by family members. In addition, through the study of a number of cases of the cross-generational cohabitation of Chinese and African families in Guangzhou, the paper will first analyze and refine the coordination of intergenerational relations. Next, the paper will explore the potential avenues for two or even three generations to harmoniously coexist. It is hoped that all research and studies contained herein will not only provide reference value for the further study of current family intergenerational relations in China, but also more importantly, supplement the current research on intergenerational relations between families in cross-border marriages.

### 3. Subjects of Research and Methods

Based on an eight-month social survey in Guangzhou conducted in 2014 and a two-month return visit to that same location in 2018, this study covers two situations in which young Chinese–African couples, who have lived and worked in Guangzhou for a long period of time, decide to live with the woman’s parents (or one of the woman’s parents), or after divorce between the Chinese–African couple, the woman takes her child back to her hometown to live with her parents. The lack of cases in which the woman lived with the man’s parents was mainly due to the fact that either the parents of the African male partner were unable to obtain a family reunification visa and had difficulty living together in Guangzhou for a long period of time, or that the parents of the African men held short-term visas, such as tourist visas, and did not intend to live in Guangzhou for an extended period of time. At the same time, respondents introduced other respondents one after the other, and even participated in a Chinese partner WeChat group so as to contact other interviewed families for more information. The aforementioned process did in fact allow for the homogenization of the respondents’ class.<sup>1</sup> Still, it was actually found that the characteristics of family members as well as differences in family relationships still forced different families to show diversified characteristics.

Of the twenty Chinese–African families interviewed, eleven lived with elderly relatives. Specifically, a full fifty five percent of families surveyed lived via intergenerational cohabitation. Interviews of twenty-two Chinese–African partners, thirteen elderly as well as siblings living in the eleven families were conducted in order to understand the respondents’ experiences and feelings toward cohabitation. In particular, respondents were asked their views on intergenerational relationships and methods used to deal with conflicts. Among the eleven families, only two Chinese wives and their parents possessed Guangzhou hukou. Chinese women and their parents in the other families surveyed, who were registered outside the country with no pension, accounted for 67% of the total. Therefore, although on the one hand the elderly do move into their children’s homes, this is done mainly in order to take care of their grandchildren. In addition, the referenced 67% also hope to obtain support from grandparents in the raising of the children as well as

other household chores. Among the families interviewed, eight households had been living together for more than one year (cumulative), and one household had been living together the longest (four years) at the time of the interview. Of the eight households interviewed, three families lived in the Chinese–African children’s families for six months out of every year because the elderly often traveled to and from multi-child families, and as such their total residence was more than one year.

Among the Chinese–African families interviewed, young couples and the elderly that lived with them attempted to explore ways in which to get along and strove to maintain a harmonious relationship, one in which both parties would enjoy the right to have a voice in decision making. However, due to differences in cultural customs, lifestyles, parenting methods, individual personalities, etc., young couples and the elderly would still possess differences regarding opinions on various types of housework. For this reason, family conflicts could easily arise if situations were handled poorly. The survey conducted found that young couples and the elderly who spend more time together are able to maintain relative stability within the family, while those who spend less time together often experience friction, resulting in both a stoic family atmosphere and heightened level of family tension. Particularly in terms of one’s right to decide on major issues, whether it be a short- or long-term relationship, any potential disagreement would trigger a conflict between the young people and the elderly. Elderly parents may say that the place they are in is “their children’s home”, and they will even take the initiative to assist their children in handling housework and raising grandchildren. Those elderly parents are willing to talk less, do more, and be less picky when it comes to family affairs. Still, those same individuals find it very hard to bite their tongue when it comes to their children’s marriage and/or child rearing. Only after a volatile fragmentation problem has occurred can the elderly weaken the intergenerational differences in a silent way. At the same time, young couples also try to find more diverse paradigms to deal with the intergenerational differences, ensure the normal operation of family affairs, and give family members a certain degree of belonging.

In fieldwork conducted, it was found that Chinese–African families living across generations are doing so within power spaces that are jointly constructed and operated by multiple members within the family structure. Furthermore, the decision-making ability and operation of each individual is dependent on other members, and the normal operation of intergenerational relationships relies on the interaction between family members. Understanding family intergenerational cohabitation relationships requires not only taking into account individual survival strategies, but more importantly, thinking from the perspective of the family as a whole.

#### **4. Intergenerational Conflict and Coordination Methods Used in Intergenerational Cohabitation**

This paper’s study attempts, through fieldwork, to divide Chinese–African intergenerational household relationships into three distinct types: regulation by intermediary, formal democracy, and excessive participation. Regulation by intermediary refers to the core figure within the family, the Chinese wife, as an intermediary responsible for mediating all conflicts between Chinese parents and African husbands. The Chinese wife does this in various ways such as by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and alleviating conflicts and power struggles that occur. In the formal democracy model, family members interact via a form of democracy in which both parents and children can seemingly obtain a certain degree of voice and decision-making power in managing family and personal affairs. However, in reality, women and the elderly often wind up on the losing end in this scenario. A stark difference between the regulation by intermediary and formal democracy models is that the former is an earnest attempt by the intermediary to alleviate family conflicts through the emotional bond between the intermediary and the parties and as a result, convince one party to accept the opinions of the other. The latter model is what appears to be a process of joint decision making through the participation of family members. Lastly,

excessive participation is the desire of the parents to have more voice and decision-making power in the marriage of their children, childcare, daily consumption, etc., which in turn affects the judgment of the children themselves and causes more complex family conflicts.

#### 4.1. Regulation by Intermediary

The successful maintenance of family relations is dependent on the emotional dependence and mutual trust between family members. However, due to differences in culture, values, behavior, emotional distancing, as well as the lack of trust, conflicts often arise between African sons-in-law and Chinese parents in at least one of the aforementioned areas. This then requires someone in the family to act as an “intermediary” to regulate the relationship between the family members, and thus return intergenerational relations to a relatively stable state. These family members who play the role of “middlemen” generally have close emotional links with other members and will actively use the bonds of a husband/wife relationship and/or parent–child relationships in order to help family members resolve conflicts.

Eric, a Malian, has lived in China for nearly eight years and has been married to his Chinese wife, Peng Peng, for six. Eric, who lives in China for nearly nine months out of the year, is eligible to apply for a family reunification (Q1) visa under new regulations. However, Eric feels that his current work visa will provide more security for his job and business activities in Guangdong. For this reason, Eric has not applied for the family reunification visa. Peng Peng plays an important role in the family as well as in business matters by not only supporting Eric’s China–Africa business dealings, but also by working to reconcile the relationship between Eric and her parents. Before getting married, Peng Peng helped Eric apply for a foreign trade company license in Guangzhou, so that Eric could work and live in Guangzhou for a long time.

At that time, it cost 50,000 yuan to apply, but today it is not less than 100,000 yuan. My friend spent a lot of money looking for an agent, and she knew the procedure, and she did all the steps to fill out the form. (Eric, trader, interviews were conducted in October 2014)

Peng Peng describes the process in detail. She checked all the documents, came up with a name for their company, one that no one else had used, rented a place in the office building, stamped her personal seal on the documents, contacted an accounting firm to take care of tax collection procedures, applied for a bank card, and obtained the bank’s capital verification form. After opening the company’s bank account, according to their contribution to the company’s capital investment, the bank opened a verification form for each of them and stamped it on the consultation letter. They took the verification form, the confirmation letter issued by the bank, the company name notice, and the lease contract to the Industrial and Commercial Bureau for company registration, and after three working days were able to obtain a business license. After obtaining the license, Peng Peng applied for a tax registration certificate from the Local Tax Bureau. Peng Peng stated that she and Eric were in love, and that she was willing to do her utmost to successfully deal with all situations, big and small, in order to ensure her husband could stay in Guangzhou. Peng Peng expressed her romantic feelings for Eric, and Eric answered that he had been in love with Peng Peng since the first time he saw her.

I don’t know how to explain it. When he and his friends came to our office, I talked to him and felt like he was “the one”. It was the first time I had felt this way. I have worked in the foreign trade market for many years and met a lot of foreigners, and the feeling that I had that day was completely different. (Peng Peng, trader, interviews were conducted in July 2014)

She was a pretty girl, but rarely spoke to me, mostly other workers helped me with my business. She came over and handed me water, spoke softly, always smiled [she] was charming. When I went to talk to others about business all I could see was her. (Eric, trader, interviews were conducted in July 2014)

After Peng Peng became Eric's girlfriend, she asked Eric to study Chinese in order to better facilitate a long-term life for the future. Unfortunately, Eric was not interested in learning the language and as a result, Peng Peng questioned his desire to stay in Japan long term and they argued. After Eric introduced Peng Peng to his parents and friends, Peng gradually learned about Eric's family and social network. Peng then continued to repeatedly persuade Eric to think long-term and learn Chinese in order to trade in China and further introduce Eric to her parents. After talking to Eric, Peng Peng's parents were initially skeptical regarding Eric's family background, social connections, and purpose for staying in China. However, over time Peng Peng's parents eventually supported their daughter's wish to marry Eric.

My parents trusted me. I often called them and told them about our life in Guangzhou. I know they need time to accept my new life. I told them we were seriously considering getting married. (Peng Peng, trader, interviews were conducted in July 2014)

Eric's wife serves as an intermediary between Eric and her parents and in addition, Peng's parents are understanding toward Eric and wish to help him integrate into their Chinese family. This, in addition to Eric's fluency in Chinese and in-depth knowledge of Chinese culture, enables Eric to have a relatively good relationship with his Chinese relatives.

My Chinese used to be poor, but now I can speak Cantonese. I know Chinese people have a strong sense of respect for the elderly... You need to greet the elderly in various festivals, but also need to send red envelopes to relatives (there is money in them)... I used to not care about this, but my father-in-law and mother-in-law could understand me (they understood that he did not know the culture), and I was slowly learning. (Eric, trader, interviews were conducted in September 2014)

Most African fathers are busy with work, and much of the responsibility for childcare falls on Chinese mothers and grandparents. Peng Peng often exchanges ideas with teachers or other parents about educating their children. Eric, with his fluent Chinese, has participated in the Sports Day at his daughter's school and learned about his children's school life. Peng Peng's mother, Mei, lives with the young couple and helps transport the children to and from school as well as takes care of the daily meals for the whole family. Mei is often involved in the daily life decisions of the young couple. Particularly when it comes to the education of her granddaughter Nana, Mei will take the initiative in order to talk to her daughter and son-in-law and express her views. For example, Eric insists that Lily follow African cultural customs, but Mei does not. Specifically, Mei believes that since the family has decided that Nana will live and study in Guangzhou in the future, the child should develop interests and hobbies similar to other Chinese children and follow the values of Chinese society.

Eric said that the child is now a Muslim and as such cannot participate in modeling or dance classes. The older Eric gets, the more conservative he becomes. It was not like this in the past. I always told my mother to respect Eric. I said that the environment has an impact on people. Eric has been in Guangzhou for a long time, and he will gradually change his ideas. The child has more contact with nearby classmates, and will adopt her own ideas. It is also possible that our daughter may not necessarily listen to her father. In the past, we also argued about these questions, but arguing can't solve the problems. Let's just take our time. These are what I have been saying to my mom. My mother is sometimes still unhappy with Eric. However, mom and I don't want to make it a family conflict. (Peng Peng, trader, interviews were conducted in August 2014)

Although Eric and his parents-in-law have a good relationship, they have different views on raising their daughter Nana. The mother-in-law believes that she has not forced her family to practice Buddhism as much as she was by her own parents. Still, she has

given others the right to choose freely. As such, she feels that Eric should respect the choices of his children. She also believes that overemphasizing the cultural differences between China and Africa in daily life will only serve to bring more pressure into Nana's life.

Nana can choose her own faith when she grows up. Learning to dance is very common here and Nana likes it. Why not let the child have a hobby? Eric will not allow Nana to participate in these activities saying that she is a Muslim girl. I sometimes really can't see eye to eye with Eric. All of Nana's classmates go to dance class. Go to dance class with classmates is a great way to make friends. I can't understand (why Eric can't see this). (Mei, Peng Peng's mother, retiree, interviews were conducted in October 2014)

Peng Peng's father, Sang, has also had conflict due to Eric's cultural values. Sang said that distant relatives invited their family to visit their homes. Those relatives politely asked Eric to try their food, which was non-halal. Eric refused and said that the relatives did not respect him. Peng Peng's parents did not discuss the matter with relatives and friends prior to visiting as more than a dozen people in the family were celebrating on that occasion. They were worried that if relatives and friends were told beforehand, then they would all feel obligated to make special dishes. Unfortunately, Eric mistakenly believed that relatives and friends did not respect his customs. For that reason, he immediately left the dinner table, which embarrassed both the hosts and guests. Peng Peng's parents said that Eric's actions were not only hurtful, but were also disrespectful to the relatives.

If we ask people to cook something special, just for him, we will impose on them. How can he be so hurt and angry that he leaves the table? Are we not embarrassed? These are our relatives and he doesn't care. We had to give gifts to the relatives to make amends. If he just sits there, talks to people, and doesn't eat, fine. Just sit and chat with everyone. Who can be happy being like this? This is not being respectful. (Sang, Peng Peng's father, retiree, interviews were conducted in October 2014)

Peng Peng took the gift to the relative's house to explain the situation and apologize. Although the relative said that what Eric did was harmless, Peng Peng's father has always had a grudge against Eric because of this. Peng Peng's father believes that Eric, a foreigner, does not understand Chinese etiquette. Sang further feels that marrying a foreigner brings a lot of external public pressure to the family. Bringing Eric to a gathering of relatives and friends was originally intended to strengthen the interaction between the son-in-law and the relatives and friends as well as dispel people's prejudices against Chinese–African marriage. However, quite the opposite happened. Eric's behavior increased the doubts of relatives and friends about the family relations between China and Africa, and their prejudices against Africans were deepened. On the one hand, Peng Peng must endure complaints from her parents and on the other, make it clear to Eric that no disrespect to him or his culture was intended. For the sake of harmonious family relations, Peng Peng strives to act as a mediator slowly alleviating the contradictions between parents and husbands. Peng Peng's mother, Mei, said:

My daughter also said that foreigners attach great importance to eating clean (halal) food. I will not bicker about this. Now, we have harmed our relationship. In the end, my daughter suffers. Suffice to say we will not ask him (Eric) to participate in the future. Her father was angry, but if he doesn't want to hurt our daughter's marriage, so we have to let it go. (Mei, Peng Peng's mother, retiree, interviews were conducted in October 2014)

Because of gaps caused by differences in values, cultural customs, and behaviors, Peng Peng acts as a mediator in order to guide her parents and husband as well as form bonds between relationships. Peng Peng skillfully guides her parents, relatives and friends so as to better promote an understanding of African culture. Still, it is imperative that African husbands understand the language and behaviors needed to maintain family harmony and

thereby allow both parties to establish positive interactions and trust is necessary in order to maintain the stability of family relations.

In most cases, the middleman is played by the young Chinese wife. The wife is able to effectively act as a regulator and mediator. In this role, she relies to a large extent on the effective bond of the parent–child as well as husband–wife relationship. Generally speaking, the intermediary should have a good husband-and-wife relationship. Both husband and wife are further able to communicate with each other regarding life and work, understand each other’s needs, adequately voice their opinions, and finally reach an agreement with one another. However, this “agreement” is not necessarily the same concept shared by both parties. Many times, it is an expression of emotion, such as Peng Peng not approving of the child’s practice of African cultural values in Guangzhou. Still, she respects and understands her husband’s emphasis on blood lineage and cultural inheritance, and therefore accepts her husband’s request in regards to the child’s religious beliefs. The middleman should also maintain a close relationship with the parents and have a strong trust with them. Peng Peng would tell her parents about Eric’s love for her, explain Eric’s foreigner status to her parents, and try to protect the interests of the African-American community as a whole. Although Peng Peng would have verbal arguments with her parents, both sides trusted each other. When Peng Peng’s husband Eric is unhappy with relatives or friends, she can play a vital role in helping him to better cope. She does this by helping relatives to gradually understand the cultural differences between China and Africa as well as by constantly convincing her husband to reconcile with relatives and friends. These all rely on strong parent–child relationships and the bond between husband and wife. The intermediary plays the role of a filial daughter to her parents. In addition, she acts as an authoritative family manager, in which capacity she resolves any and all conflicts between parents and spouses in a timely manner.

A small number of Chinese women in Chinese–African families were fortunate enough to rely on their mothers to help out. With that assistance, those women were then able to enter the workplace just like the men. Although housework can be done by older women, who does the housework is deeply reflected in the constraints of the gender norm. Even if wives can rely on their elderly mothers to conduct housework, they are also anxious as their mothers are sometimes unhappy with their African husbands for various reasons. Some elderly mothers even choose to leave Guangzhou to return to their hometowns because of this. Chinese couples try their best to make their mothers feel comfortable, and due to their mothers’ inability to converse in foreign languages, they act as translators for their spouses. In addition, the wives often exaggerate their praise of their African partners to their mothers. They do this, at least in part, so that their mothers will stay in Guangzhou for a longer period of time and continue to help take care of the family, especially the young children.

How much does it cost to find a babysitter? I am relieved that my mother is here. One reason is to help us pick up and drop off our children from school and bring them to extracurricular activities and the other is to help us with housework. I return home every day at 11 p.m. and don’t want to move. My mom always gets everything done and when I get home I just check my children’s homework. What do you do if you find that a babysitter has abused your child? Do you know what that babysitter is making your child eat? It is also very awkward to live with a stranger. If it is my own mother, if she sometimes is not happy with us, we can talk about it and let it go easily. But, if the babysitter is unhappy and says that she doesn’t want to continue, then we will be in trouble. Do we have time every day to look for another babysitter? I just coaxed my mom to stay here a little longer. My husband is also used to my mother being with us. He is used to coming home to hot meals and having a clean house. In the past, he used to get angry with my mom regarding the preparation of his halal meals, which in turn angered my mom. Later, I got angry with him. I didn’t do housework and didn’t care if he ate or not. Later, he also thought that it was very good for my mother

to be at home and we then coaxed my mother to come to Guangzhou. Now what we do is to buy beef and lamb and ask my mother to use different pots to cook the food. My mother slowly got used to it. Anyway, just praise my mother for being internationally minded and open to understanding different cultures and she then cooperates with us. (Peng Peng, trader, interviews were conducted in November 2014)

The mothers of the Chinese women who stated that they left their hometowns in order to travel to Guangzhou and live with their daughters and African husbands both helped their daughters and fulfilled their role of motherhood. Those mothers stretched the definition of maternal duties as they took care of their grandchildren as a form of showing love to their children. They were not only concerned about their daughter's well-being, but also about the health of their daughter's marriage and new family.

#### 4.2. Formal Democracy

Most Chinese partners come to Guangzhou to work and are able to enjoy living independently. At the same time, some parents need support from their children in their daily lives and in turn behave less intrusively in their children's lives and choices. Shuangjie was from rural Hunan, her husband Bowman from Nigeria. Shuangjie obeyed Bowman and quit her job in shop management in order to become a housewife. Shuangjie invited her mother to come to Guangzhou to live with them and help take care of two children. However, Shuangjie's mother was elderly, she was from Hunan, spoke Hunan dialect, and as such her Mandarin pronunciation was not clear. Bowman had difficulty understanding his mother-in-law and was quite dissatisfied with both the inability to communicate as well as his mother-in-law's daily habits. Bowman and his mother-in-law largely did not speak at home. Bowman said that he felt his mother-in-law was not adapting to living in the city. After consulting with his wife, he gave his mother 50,000 yuan for living expenses in addition to money for travel expenses. He then had his mother-in-law return to her rural hometown alone. In fact, Shuangjie felt deeply guilty for not being able to support her mother. Shuangjie did not have her own income and in addition was unable to resolve the many trivial issues that Bowman and her mother had between them. Shuangjie's only option was to acquiesce to her husband's tough attitude and demands. Shuangjie did hope that she could work outside and obtain an income so as to both alleviate the situation of being constrained by her husband as well as in order to be able to send any extra money to her mother. Unfortunately, after numerous discussions, Bowman did not agree with Shuangjie's wishes. However, he did agree with Shuangjie buying foreign snacks and selling them in the rental shop near the community. In the end, due to a lackluster income from the store (there was even a time when it operated at a loss), Bowman repeatedly urged Shuangjie to stop working. Shuangjie was then forced to abandon the store and return home to take care of the children.

During interviews, similar to Shuangjie's, five other Chinese respondents who had converted to their husbands' religion said that although they were married to African Muslim men, in actuality they did not understand the essence of the religion. The women had thought that their husbands would, in order to adapt to the local environment, change their strict religious views and allow them to move in society freely as they did previous to marriage. This was not the case. The women chose to wear Muslim clothing for the sake of family harmony. For the wives, this was similar to a barter agreement. If they followed their husband's rules, then the husband would then give them more emotional and financial support. However, these women converted to Islam and as such their African husbands believed that they were then devout believers. In keeping with this, the husbands believed that the women should obey and support their husbands cultural and religious beliefs, without requiring the husbands to give much in return. Some African Muslim men believe that men have more power and decision-making power than women. For example, fathers and sons are considered to be of a higher ranking than mothers, wives, and daughters. This is particularly true in husband–wife relationships, where husbands are entitled to make

decisions on the wife's behalf. These men generally believe that the father is responsible for supporting the family outside the home, and that the raising of children is an important responsibility of the mother within the family. In addition, the Muslim men feel that the mother should have a strong sense of responsibility for the education of the children; if the child gets out of control, then the mother will be seen as being responsible. Some African men also say that while they accept their wives working outside the home to increase family income, those same women need to pay attention to what they wear, as well as all social interactions and those with other men. However, even when the aforementioned aspects are dictated to Chinese wives by their African partners, they still wish to work outside in order to earn their own income. This is especially evident when the wives feel pressured by their families, which then strengthens their determination to work outside the home. In contrast, from the perspective of some African husbands, the mere act of the wife working outside the home seems to be challenging the husband's dominance, particularly when the wife neglects the responsibility of raising the children due to her work. This then contradicts the perception of work and family relationships. In the end, when the wife chooses to obey her husband's request to stop working and return to the family to stabilize the family relationship, or when the wife wears "compliant" clothing, it seems on the face of it that the Chinese–African partners have reached some kind of consensus through discussion. However, this should be seen for what it truly is, a formal democracy brought about by the compromise of the Chinese wives.

#### 4.3. Excessive Participation Type

Xiaofang, a rural girl from Hubei Province, has long resisted her parents arranging a blind date for her. Instead, she insists on living with Merlin, a Ghanaian who is eleven years her senior. Xiaofang also intends to live in Ghana in the future. Xiaofang said that her parents came to Guangzhou in order to work. While her mother worked as a nanny, her father worked as a security guard in town. The three of them rented a small house in an urban area. After arriving in Guangzhou, a multicultural city, Xiaofang was able to see how women had a sense of individuality and were much less constrained by their parents. This was in stark contrast to the much more rural area in which she was raised. As Merlin was much older than Xiaofang, her parents did voice their suspicions and concerns that he may have had a family back in Africa. Xiaofang's parents asked her to go on a blind date with an acquaintance in the hope that she could in the future have a stable married life. Her parents are most worried that Xiaofang will be abandoned if and when she encounters family problems in Africa, as she will be alone and far away from her homeland. For this reason, they often try to get Xiaofang to break up with Merlin. Her parents will deliberately avoid encounters with Merlin and use words such as "unfilial", "no conscience", and "disobedient to your elders" when speaking with Xiaofang in an effort to break the two apart. When Xiaofang chose to live with an African partner, she went outside her parent's traditional view of marriage and family. In addition, Xiaofang's desire to live in Africa broke the parent–child relationship that her parents cared about most, thus triggering family conflicts.

Because her parents did not give Xiaofang a household registration book, Xiaofang chose to undergo a religious marriage, one not protected by Chinese law, in order to fulfill her wish to marry Merlin. Xiaofang's parents never accepted their daughter's choice:

As long as she thinks that is good for her, we can't do anything about it. If she wants to go to Africa, we won't say anything. She has a good life there, it is good. If she doesn't have a good life there, then she just needs to bear it all by herself. Her father and I have not been able to sleep well thinking about this situation. We are sad parents, we do everything for her good but she won't listen to us. We often argue with her. We are so sad. We cannot meet that African. Now she moved out, when she called home we just listened and didn't talk anymore (try to persuade her again). (Qin, Xiaofang's mother, nanny, interviews were conducted in August 2014)

Xiaonan, a native of Shandong, is also experiencing interference from her family. Her parents believe that Xiaonan's Nigerian partner Gini has used Xiaonan's business relationships solely to develop his China–Africa trade business and feel that he has no interest in living in China long-term. Gini said that the reason it has been taking him so long to get a marriage license is because Xiaonan's parents have expected them to go through marriage procedures in China. Gini further stated that he and Xiaonan have been busy with business and have not had time to go to Xiaonan's hometown in Shandong in order to take care of marriage registration details, etc. In addition, Gini said that he was unable to immediately return to Nigeria to prepare personal identity materials, such as passport, visas, originals and translations of birth certificates, obtaining translations of the companies' business licenses, etc. Gini believes that the easiest way to accomplish all of this is for Xiaonan to accompany him to Nigeria when he goes there for business and obtain a marriage certificate at that time locally through much simpler procedures. However, Xiaonan's parents also believe that Xiaonan, being unmarried, is pregnant as well. They are also worried that the marriage certificate in Nigeria is not legal in China and firmly oppose their daughter going to Nigeria to obtain one. Gini again suggested holding a religious wedding and a small party in a private Nigerian church in Guangzhou. After doing so they would be able to get a marriage license in China, but Xiaonan's parents insisted that their daughter's legitimate rights and interests could only be protected by legal marriage documents and a Chinese wedding held in China. Xiaonan's parents also feel that it is not practical and totally inconsistent with local wedding customs to invite their relatives living in Shandong to a religious wedding in Nigeria. They also emphasized that holding a grand Chinese wedding in their hometown of Shandong can serve not only to entertain guests, but also allow both parties to feel the responsibility of family as well as legitimize the relationship between the couple to all relatives and friends, thereby reducing gossip. Still, Gini was unable to understand the concerns of his Chinese in-laws and as a result, did not get a marriage license with Xiaonan in China and did not hold a Chinese wedding. Xiaonan said that Gini often travels to and from Central Africa in order to conduct cross-border trade and she often feels the burden of a long-distance relationship and fears that one day their relationship may fail. However, owing to and after the birth of two children, Nan gradually established a sense of family and a sense of security. In the end, Xiaonan did not follow her parents' advice and chose to hold a small wedding banquet with Gini at the Nigerian Church in Guangzhou.

The participation of Chinese relatives in individual marriage and family choices is not easy for many African men to accept. This, in addition to the realities that many African partners face (language barriers, differing cultural practices, and values, etc.) coupled with the necessity of often traveling back and forth between China and Africa leads to less interaction between the African partner and his Chinese relatives and friends. Chinese parents distrust African sons-in-law as they feel that the Africans are not interested in integrating into life in China. In the event a misunderstanding arises, the only option that both sides have is to rely on the Chinese partner as an intermediary to facilitate communication. Unfortunately, when that partner exhibits any behavior deemed to be protecting the African partner, she will be accused by family members as promoting friction within the family.

Cultures are different, they (Africans) do not know our etiquette at all, do not greet relatives during the New Year's Festival, and do not say that they will go back to the hometown to see families and relatives. They do not speak Chinese well. We can't learn the African partner's language at such an old age, and because of this we don't have much to say at home. We don't expecting anything from him. No matter how we can get by, we just don't know what they want. We are afraid that the African partner will deceive our daughter. (Bing, Nan's father, farmer, interviews were conducted in October 2014)

Although the concerns or some suggestions of Chinese parents should be heard by the African sons-in-law, African men are considered for their individual dignity and family

status. They see themselves as the core decision makers of the family and eventually reject and exclude Chinese relatives from the decision-making process, which only serves to exacerbate rifts between relatives and generations. Due to their many conflicts with Gini, Xiaonan's parents decided to return to their hometown after taking care of their grandson for half a year.

Among the twenty Chinese couples interviewed, a total of eighteen foreigners lived and worked in Guangzhou year-round but could not obtain a Guangzhou hukou. Therefore, living in Guangzhou is expensive and makes it impossible for them to know whether or not their lives will prosper in the long term. When these women are unable to gain a sense of belonging in their workplace, they are more eager to obtain emotional dependence via entering into a stable marriage. This in turn allows them to avoid depression, anxiety, or emotional isolation caused by their many social pressures. Some Chinese couples choose to live together because of their personal experiences and thereby gain a sense of belonging. Still, others expect to start a family through legal marriage, but do not receive the understanding and support of their relatives.

In traditional Chinese society, the basic structural functional unit of society is the family, not the individual (Yang and He 2014; Wu 2017; Shen 2019). This has been the case in the past and still is today. Chinese families are closely linked by common interests and core values. Chinese women are eager to choose their own African partners, but if the marriage between the African men and Chinese women is not accepted by family members, then it will undermine the common values and interests of the family. This in turn causes stress. Although the Chinese wives wish to balance the relationship between their small family and their parents, they feel that if they fail to meet the expectations of their parents, then they will become alienated from them and thus lose a sense of family belonging.

## 5. Conclusions

For Chinese, the family is the basic unit of social structure. Blood is an important bond and traditional moral concepts, such as filial piety, have a profound impact on society and dictate one's familial responsibilities and obligations. Individuals believe that life comes from their parents and that it is the duty of men to take care of the elderly, to provide a stable life for their wives and children, and that their bloodline will be inherited by their heirs. Chinese have close blood and family ties that play an important role in deciding on religious beliefs, arranging marriages and funerals, and other events within the family (Shi 2016).

Because of the emphasis on blood relatives and heirs, China has long attached importance to parent-child relations (Yang and He 2014). Although relationships between sisters-in-law were close in the past, those types of relationships are rare in today's society. Today, interpersonal relations within the modern Chinese family are gradually becoming simpler. Still, the parent-child relationship is very close. Children are cherished and respect for the elderly and filial piety are stressed, and they lack appropriate psychological and spatial distance (Wu 2017). On the one hand, the relationship between the husband and wife has gradually become independent. Tradition dictates that the husband is the head of the family and that the wife will maintain the household, which will then result in the stability of the family (Peng and Hu 2015). Today, due to the division of labor, the education level of women has increased, and women are free to seek any job in society. This new sense of spiritual and material independence has freed women from having to bear traditional responsibilities of women in the family. This in turn has triggered changes in the family power structure and relations between family members. In one respect, the emotional dependence between parents and children has not weakened. Due to the low birth rate at present, parents tend to focus their attention on their children, and all parent-child relationships become the center of parental lives and emotions as well as the source of one's psychological pleasure in life (Zhong and He 2014). In particular, Chinese families rely on the emotional transfer of parent-child relationships in order to compensate for the emotional satisfaction that cannot be obtained in the relationship between husband and

wife. However, children expect privacy and independence, which leads to an alienated but intimate relationship (Yang and He 2014).

In order to maintain a good parent–child relationship bond, generally the son or daughter will exhibit filial piety and be obedient toward their parents as well as other elderly. This will provide the family with continuity as well as allow all to gain a sense of belonging and feel protected. When children do not follow the so-called principle of filial piety, they will be criticized by family, friends, and even others. Clearly, China is a society that places great emphasis on the parent–child relationship.

In this environment that emphasizes both the parent–child relationship as well as filial piety, the concept of marrying and listening to the advice of elders is a manifestation of filial piety and one that still subtly affects and influences all Chinese. In particular, parents believe that children should respect and obey their advice regarding marriage advice due to the fact that the parents are acting out of love as well as due to their own personal experiences. When children act outside the expectations of their parents, the parents often feel that this is an act of rebellion and an unfilial act. For example, those Chinese women who did not listen to their parents and insisted on maintaining a romantic relationship and even marrying African men is seen as a large deviation in filial piety in the eyes of their parents.

By examining the cases of the Chinese–African families in this paper, the different strategies that the families choose to employ in order to deal with intergenerational relationships while living in the same dwelling with in-laws can be understood. Those strategies can be classified into the following models: regulation by intermediary, formal democracy, and excessive participation. Regulation by an intermediary refers to a form of positive intergenerational relationship coordination conducted between Chinese and Africans across generations. When conflicts occur between the two sides, the intermediary helps both sides understand each other and adopts a relatively inclusive approach to deal with the problem so as to avoid intensifying the situation. This approach requires that high demands be placed on the emotional adhesion and power control of the middleman and other family members. The model of formal democracy largely involves a balance of power, which is reflected in the democratic participation of family members in the decision-making process. However, in the families interviewed, it was found that on the surface, although family members consulted with one another, in essence it was the elderly parents or the daughters who withdrew from decision making on important matters. For this reason, it can be said that formal democracy is a type of alien form of male authority in many families. Judging by the results of the interviews conducted, the model of regulation by intermediary works in families with good intergenerational relations, where it is used more easily in order to establish and operate household relationships. As a part of this, intermediaries use a balance of power in order to support emotional interactions between the generations. The formal democracy model is a style in which one party primarily makes a decision, while others make the necessary concessions in order to maintain family relations.

Employing the excessive participation model is a more negative and relatively extreme approach to intergenerational family relationships. This model is reflected in the attempts by Chinese parents to exert a greater influence regarding decision making in their children's families. However, those attempts are resisted by the African men. Because African men are a minority in Chinese society and as such lack a voice, they are even more resolute in their belief that within their own families they, the men, must control the decision-making process. For this reason, they refuse to transfer any decision making to others, and also for this reason, conflict arises between the children and parents.

Chinese parents who decide to live together with Chinese–African couples are primarily engaged in the upbringing of their grandchildren. For this reason it can be said that they are the “continuity of housework”. Chinese wives who invite their mothers, who are elderly, to Guangzhou to help raise their children, are effectively manipulating the patriarchal system. In other words, they are assigning and subcontracting their motherly and wifely duties across gender, kinship, and market mechanisms. The responsibility

for Chinese women as wives and mothers is transferred to their mothers so as to avoid marital conflicts that arise from requiring their husbands to share in household chores. The elderly mothers have chosen to take on the aforementioned role in exchange for a reduction in living expenses and filial piety from their children. The elderly mother has become an important participant in transnational marriages. Housework is a prime area for constructing gender boundaries: housework and motherhood shape the core content of a woman's duties.

This is in contrast to the standard image of men raising their families. Even in reality, some women have gradually jumped out of the traditional dichotomy of gender division, whether voluntarily or helplessly, to become full-time working women. However, the gender ideology associated with housework in Chinese–African families profoundly affects the women's perception of life as well as self-identity. Whether the women are personally engaged in housework after work or if they ask their mothers to do it, in either case, housework is still regarded as the core task of women (Lan 2011).

The intergenerational cohabitation families studied in this paper reflect the differences in methods used to maintain family harmony as well as family ethics and values between generations. On the one hand, maintaining family and shared ethics promotes a bond between parents and children. Contrastingly, value differences promote tension within the family. Young children take care of the material and spiritual life of their parents as the main manifestation of their filial piety, while parents provide support to their children in the form of taking care of their grandchildren, thereby alleviating pressure in their children's lives. These shared family ethics make intergenerational cohabitation possible. However, issues also arise regarding the ability of the Chinese and African partners' ability to establish an intimate relationship. This then increases intergenerational conflicts, making Chinese–African family relations more and more complicated. Even some elderly people relinquish power, enabling the young couples to be more authoritative. This may be related to a family power game being played out in Chinese society today. In closing, this paper has served to identify new models used for familial coordination among generations. Those areas, as well as whether or not issues, similar to the ones identified in this paper, exist in transnational marriages outside China require further discussion.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> The Chinese-African families interviewed share similarities in terms of economic base, cultural characteristics, occupational characteristics, values, etc., and in turn enter into the same interpersonal group, forming small Chinese-African family gathering groups. It is also because of their closer relationship that they are willing to introduce other families among them to the interviewer for investigation. Chinese-African families within a group strengthen their relationships by organizing birthday parties for their children, celebrating traditional festivals, and traveling together. Families with different values, different cultural characteristics, and different economic conditions slowly withdrew from the group, thus reinforcing the similar cultural traits and values of the members of the group. For example, Chinese-African families living in the same neighborhood or nearby neighborhoods have frequent contact with each other, because the price of housing in these neighborhoods also implies the economic conditions and income levels of the households in the neighborhoods; on the other hand, their children may attend the same school near their homes, and they may choose to strengthen their contact with each other in consideration of the socioeconomic status, future development of the social contacts. This is why the interviewer described the above characteristics as "the homogenization of the respondents' class".

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