'I don't want to have a separated home': Reckoning family and return migration among married Nigerians in China

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Abstract

The growing 'Africans in China' literature has documented the extent and extensiveness of flows from Africa to Chinese cities. However, return migration has not received much attention, and even less is known about the role of the family in return consideration. The article focuses on how married Nigerians reckon return and family in Guangzhou city using data from ethnographic observations and interviews with 25 participants. While the family is central to how married migrants think about return, the dynamics vary among the participants. Migrants whose spouses/children reside in Nigeria complain about being distant from their families and the challenge of unification and 'absentee fatherhood'. Nigerian couples that live in Guangzhou as a family consider the high cost of raising children and the future competitiveness of their children as 'China-educated' as factors in return calculations. Moreover, despite living with their husbands in China, some Nigerian women desire to return to Nigeria to improve their lives, but they did not embark on a return journey to avoid family separation. Among Nigerians in an interracial relationship with Chinese women, the feeling of (un)belongingness resonates in their return consideration owing to poor experiences with access to residence permit and social welfare. While integration issues impact on return migration of married Nigerians in Guangzhou, the transnational practices of the men suggest that a return behaviour would probably accompany return consideration.

Keywords: Africans in China, interracial marriage, return migration, social integration, Guangzhou

1. Introduction

International return migration among Nigerians has mostly been researched within the context of deportation or forced repatriation (see White 2009; Eborka 2014; Idowu-Faith

2014; Plambech 2018), and return migration-development connections (De Haas 2006; Lampert 2012; IOM 2014; James et al. 2014). Scholars have mainly discussed the dynamics of Nigerian return migration in predominantly Western societies, where undocumented Nigerians succumb to deportation (Plambech 2018) and the expatriate class 'stay put' or engage in circular migration (Eborka 2014). This article focuses on how family considerations feature in the way that married Nigerians reckon return migration in their everyday life in Guangzhou, China.

The growing 'Africans in China' literature has documented and diagnosed the extent, extensiveness, and consequences of flows from Africa to Chinese cities (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007; Li et al. 2008; Zhang 2008; Bodomo 2010; Mathews and Yang 2012; Pang and Yuan 2013; Castillo 2014). Although there is an earlier flow that involved students (Cheng 2011; Liu 2013; Bredeloup 2014), it is the movement of traders, which began in the 1990s and intensified in the 2000s, that marked a watershed in African migrations to China (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007). While no accurate data exists, a speculative account indicates that there are more than 100,000 Africans in China, with the majority being traders who visit Guangzhou city (Bodomo 2016), one of China's wealthiest cities located in Guangdong Province. According to Bodomo and Pajancic (2015), Africans in China originated from different countries with the largest groups coming from West Africa, including Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, and Senegal. Strikingly, the majority are typically aged 25–34 years and predominantly men. Thus, Guangzhou could easily qualify as a 'male town' for African migrants despite the arrival of more women in recent years (Tu Huynh 2016, Davis et al. 2016).

As the most populous among African migrant group, Nigerians are visible in Guangzhou city spaces. The Nigerian Consulate in Guangzhou estimates that up to 70,000 Nigerians visited temporarily in 2014, and in 2017, about 400 have a residence permit. Their population has been on the rise since the 1990s when the early arrivals trickled in from South Korea, Hong Kong, and nearby Chinese cities like Shenzhen.[1] The early arrivals congregated in Sanyuanli as *Igbo Ezue*, a construction that connotes the gathering of the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria, and later outnumbered other African groups. The intensification of Nigeria–China trade (Egbula and Zheng 2011; Lan and Xiao 2014) and family unification and interracial marriage (Lan 2015) has sustained flows and settlement. However, apart from those holding valid business, marriage, and student visas at any given time, the vast majority of Nigerians are undocumented (Haugen 2012, also interview with Nigerian Consulate Official).

In confronting what Haugen (2015) describes as a 'new migration reality', the Chinese state has, in recent years, pursued immigration reforms that made it tougher for Africans to enter, work, and stay in China (Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014; Lan 2014). The reform, introduced in 2013 under the Exit and Entry Administration Law, imposed more stringent fines and jail terms for immigration offenders and gave Chinese locals the responsibility—with incentive—to report 'illegals' (Haugen 2015). Worse still, many Africans live precariously (Castillo 2015) and experience discrimination and racism, alongside other cultural, social, and health barriers (Rennie 2009; Hood 2013; Hall et al. 2014; Bodomo 2015). Consequent to these unfavourable conditions, some African migrants are making a U-turn away from China. Indeed, one collaborative project, titled 'UTURN Asia,' which documents and archives the painful experiences of Gambian

returnee to discourage others from migrating to China, is indicative of the return movement that is taking place among Africans in Guangzhou city.[2] Unfortunately, conjectures and data scarcity continue to plague our understanding of return migration among Africans in Chinese cities.

In exploring return migration among Africans in China, I concentrate on how migrants contemplate and ground return in family considerations. A trend of thought in migration literature is that return is often a going concern for migrants. Carling (2004: 120) contends that '... the aspiration to emigrate is formulated with intentions to return.' Stechow (2016) as well argues that return is inseparable from migration project. Even though many migrants never achieve their return goals (Sinatti 2011), they nonetheless have return in mind at the time of departure (Carling and Schewel 2018).

This article is premised on the claim that migrants consider returning to their countries of origin as part and parcel of their migration project, and, most crucially, that family concerns play a critical role in this process. By focusing on married Nigerians in Guangzhou, I explore how they reflect on and integrate family-related matters in the interpretations of macro- and micro-level conditions that shape return. I treat 'married' migrants as a case in order to concentrate on migrants with family sentiments, whether they are in a relationship with Chinese or Nigerians. The family is placed at the centre of analysis because it is an under-assessed component of return migration, despite having been long situated as an essential factor in the migration process. The durability and size of the Nigerian community in Guangzhou made it an appropriate group of focus.

Focusing on the role of the family in return migration is significant for two important reasons. One, even though return migration has featured in many evidence-based analyses of international migration, only a few research treat the family as being central to return consideration. Attentiveness to the role of the family can illuminate how family concerns often complicate return decision, especially among married migrants residing abroad with or without their spouses and children. Two, exploring this issue in the context of China is significant given that return migration, and the role of the family in return consideration, is largely missing in the study of African migrations in the Asia region. Understanding return dynamics in this space will advance the literature on the possible reverse trajectory of African migrations in Asia and how the family context is shaping it. After this introduction, I present an overview of the literature on the dynamics of return migration. I pay attention to how the family features in return migration literature. The methodology is then described, after which I present the findings. In concluding, I discuss the findings and highlight some theoretical implications arising from a 'family-centred' analysis in return migration.

2. Returnees, family, and migration research

Although lamentation over the neglect of return in migration research has not ceased (King 2000; Okome 2014; Caro Carretero et al. 2018), scholarly engagement with it is on the rise. Some focus on the connections between return migration and development (Ammassari 2004; Eborka 2014; Åkesson and Baaz 2015; Akanle 2018) while others

explore the forms and consequences of return, including involuntary returns, deportability, and reintegration (Arowolo 2000; Setrana and Tonah 2014; David 2017; Kleist 2017, 2018; Plambech 2018). However, return intentions, reasons, and determinants of return migration have generated the most interest (Carling 2004; Makina 2012; Bijwaard and Van Doeselaar 2014; Carling and Pettersen 2014; Setrana and Tonah 2014; Flahaux and Reeve 2015; Flahaux 2017; Paparusso and Ambrosetti 2017; Tran et al. 2018).

A salient position in return migration literature is that emigration is often formulated with the intention to return (Carling 2004; Carling and Schewel 2018). This makes many migrations temporary in nature (Bijwaard and Van Doeselaar 2014). However, there is no consensus on what determines return, why and the circumstances under which it occurs. In fact, a critical and comprehensive theoretical attempt underlines the viability of most international migration theories to explain return migration (Cassarino 2004). Empirical evidence similarly suggest that many factors shape return, including personal features, economic, social, and contextual ones (Caro Carretero et al. 2018). Also, some identify that the initial reason for undertaking a journey is vital in explaining return behaviour (Arowolo 2000; Flahaux and Reeve 2015). Moreover, Carling and Pettersen (2014) probe into how ties at origin and destination countries influence return intentions. They report that those weakly integrated but strongly transnational are most likely to have return intentions. They further identify gender, age, educational level, religiosity, and migration history as salient influences on return intentions. Meanwhile, based on a dataset of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, Makina (2012) finds that six factors are vital for return, including the purpose of migration, the number of dependents in origin country, education, economic activities at destination, income level, and duration of stay. Besides, having networks of friends and acquaintances in destination country discourages return (Setrana and Tonah 2014) while the existence of a stricter immigration policy also impacts on return migration (Carling 2004; Flahaux 2017).

While not a central focus, the family features in many explanations of return. As part of the social structure, the setting and ties within which individuals are embedded shape return migration process (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016). Elijah (2013: 298) maintains '... that on balance, family and life cycle factors might be more important for returnees than for initial emigration.' Likewise, Tiemoko (2004) submits that social and family issues are essential to migrants and influence their migration trajectories, ranking among the top three reasons for returnees from Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. Also, Bijwaard and Van Doeselaar (2014) reveal that changes in the marital status of those who moved as family migrants impact on return migration, albeit differently among migrants from developing and developed countries.

Furthermore, among Ghanaian returnees, Elijah (2013) finds that the principal determinants of return are family related. However, family influences are more pronounced among females than male returnees. He attributed this difference, which could vary by marital status, to women's natural maternal, domestic, and conjugal roles. Likewise, Setrana and Tonah (2014), also focusing on Ghanaians, discover that migrants negotiate the decision to return with spouses and adult children whom they must pressurise, if necessary, to align with return plan. Although events in the origin and destination countries, as well as the age of migrants, influence return, Setrana and Tonah (2014: 121–22) conclude that essentially, '... return is a negotiated process among family members.' Besides,

in cases that deportability fears sustain worry over return, family concern remains inherently cogent in return consideration (Alpes 2014).

Recently, Caro Carretero et al. (2018) surmise that migrants with family ties, mainly spouse and children, in a destination country are unlikely to cultivate return intentions. In the European context, Flahaux and Reeve (2015: 114) corroborate that 'over time-family life in Europe thus leads to more permanent settlement than originally planned.' Among those with children especially, parental concern about the unequal geographical distribution of well-being-enhancing environment often mediates return (Poppe et al. 2016). That is, regardless of their desire to return, parents worry about the quality of education and social environment and well-being of children. In the Norwegian context, however, Carling and Pettersen (2014) found that those who entered because of family ties are likely to have return intentions than migrants who came in for protection, work or studies. What is more, links to extended family in the country of origin constitute a driver of return (Poppe et al. 2016). For instance, Grace, a Ghanaian returnee, did not only link her initial reasons for departure to the family but also locates the completion of her migration project in the final return to the same family (Stechow 2016: 8).

That said, Tiemoko (2004: 160) observes that 'in practice . . . direct family reasons for return are intertwined with job and business expectations, and a broader expectation of being welcomed by family and relatives.' Also, the desire to return may not necessarily lead to an actual return. This position is plausible, in Okome (2014)'s view, because people may lack the ability or the will to ultimately follow through with desires even when they wish to return. Moreover, migrants may relocate to a third country, return temporarily or change how they migrate by adopting circular migration rather than return permanently to the country of origin. As Sinatti (2011) insists, the permanent return can be a challenging goal to achieve. Indeed, the capacity of migrants to lead transnational lives is especially making permanent return obsolete. The 'transnational reality' allows migrants to practice an 'unsettled return', which makes return 'vague and unstructured' (Sinatti 2011).

This study explores how migrants consider family issues when they think about return. Here, family consideration refers to a process of contemplation that is foreground in familial values, beliefs, practices, and practicalities. It also denotes a sense in which familial attachments and relationships structure the reflexivity of migrants regarding return. While framing return migration as a critical course of action, I contend that in deciding what to do about whether or not to depart from a destination country, there are familial undercurrents that migrants accord considerable attention. This approach takes return beyond a 'desire' or a 'wish' awaiting translation into a return decision and problematises it as a conceptually loaded notion with meanings and interpretations which migrants reflect upon in their day-to-day life in a foreign country.

3. Methodology

The qualitative ethnographic design was adopted to collect information from Nigerians in Guangzhou, China. Guangzhou is a commercial megacity in Guangdong Province and lies to the north of the Pearl River Delta and borders the South China Sea and adjacent to

Hong Kong and Macao. With over 12 million people in 2011 and a vibrant industrial sector, the city ranks third among China's ten largest cities. In media and scholarly publications, African traders are reported to have concentrated in the city, having moved out of Hong Kong, Bangkok, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur, and opened offices in Baiyun and Yuexiu Districts (Li et al. 2008; Haugen 2012). The city has become a centre of immigration from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Nigeria (Haugen 2012).

I conducted fieldwork over two visits in 2017. Informants were interviewed under different conditions, mostly at work in shops, offices, restaurants, and homes. All 25 participants were married[3] to either Nigerians or Chinese. All the four female participants were married to Nigerians, but only 16 out of the total of 21 male participants were married to Nigerian women while the rest (five) were married to Chinese women. Regarding the location of spouses, all four females lived with their husbands and children in China. However, the spouses and children of males lived across four countries, including Nigeria (12), China (7), the USA (1), and Canada (1) (see Table 1).

The main questions explored with participants were whether and why they will or were considering living in China permanently. Similar and repeated responses were used to generate themes for analysis. With the aid of a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 11), the first main step was to open-code and categorise similar codes into themes. For focused coding, I paid attention to how participants referenced 'family factors' while contemplating leaving or staying put in Guangzhou.

But what constitutes 'family factors'? Taking a cue from Tiemoko (2004) who proposes that the solution to sharpening the definitional boundary of the 'family' lies in outlining a meaning *a priori*, I conceptualise 'family' as formations of varied sizes with members who identify and associate with one another in a complex web of relationships and interdependencies. While members may embed in multiple family types at the same time, the degree of embeddedness vary. This way, loyalty and responsibility to one's nuclear family may be different from what obtains in an extended family situation. In this study, I focus on the families of orientation and procreation—not the extended family. While narrow, this conception of the family reflects the kind that participants generally referenced as being at the centre of their return consideration. The narrow view is also in consonance with the changing structure of family ties in African societies, which scholars in the field of African migrations have identified (see Kastner 2010; Akanle 2011; Mberu et al. 2013).

I present the findings in the next section using summaries and direct quotations. I created pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants while using tags to organise quotes and narratives.

4. Reckoning family, routinising return: from pre-departure to lived experience in China

Along Guangyuan Xi Lu (or Guangyuan West Road) in Guangzhou, some multi-storey buildings house retail and wholesale clothing, textiles, and shoes markets. While Nigerians are noticeable in different parts of the city, they are prominent in Guangyuan Xi Lu, from the Canaan Export Clothes Trade Centre, Goutai Plaza, Tongtong buildings

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Information	Frequency (N = 25)
Sex	
Female	4
Male	21
Years in China	
≤1	2
1–3	3
4–6	5
7–10	11
10+	4
Ethnicity	
Hausa	3
Igbo	18
Yoruba	4
Education	
Primary	1
Secondary	12
Tertiary	5
Not known	7
Family type	
Mono-racial	20
Mixed-race	5
Spouse/children location	
China	11
Nigeria	12
Third country	2
Previous travel	
No	15
Yes	9
Not known	1
Visa status	
Expired	5
Valid	18
Not known	2

to Yingfu market. When I arrived in Guangzhou for the first time, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a separatist organisation headquartered in the Igbo-dominated region of South-eastern Nigeria, is making the headline globally for protesting against the Nigerian state. With Igbo people as the dominant Nigerian ethnic extraction in the city, Guangzhou is alive with discussions about Nigeria; on the street, in shops and offices, and homes. However, discussions about Nigeria are not all about IPOB.

In one shop, a Nigerian woman, named Oby (female/28), is sorting the orders and Gladys (female/29), her Nigerian friend, is helping out. The customers, all women, are having a conversation about family and the problem of raising children in Nigeria. The conversation continues with Oby and Gladys contributing to the discussion while also haggling to arrive at an agreeable price with the customers. At some point, I realise that Gladys, like the rest of Oby's customers, is a short-term visitor to Guangzhou and would return to Nigeria in a few days. Unlike those customers, however, Gladys had resided in China with her Nigerian husband (and later her children) between 2009 and 2016. Then, her main reason for coming to China was to 'settle down with *Oga*'[4] after they had married in Nigeria. Before her husband decided to relocate to Nigeria in 2016, Gladys moved around and lived in different Chinese cities, including Shanghai, Beijing, Yiwu, Macao, and Guangzhou. Gladys later told me that she was happy to relocate and prefer the new arrangement of 'coming and going' for business purposes. According to her, raising a family in China is difficult.

During an interview with Oby, she mentions that Gladys is only one of her many friends that had left Guangzhou. Some of the interracial and 'pure Nigerian' children that her two daughters used to play with returned to Nigeria with their parents because it became hard to live in the city. Many times, Oby broached the issue of return. However, she does not intend to leave the city just yet. With a thriving apparel shop and her husband's businesses, Oby found a good school for her daughters, even though the school is too distant than she preferred. Moreover, unlike many Africans in Guangzhou, she also speaks fluent Chinese language, having obtained a Chinese Language degree from a popular university in China. However, beyond her 'capability to stay put', a greater motivation for remaining in China is her husband. As she later states, 'the only thing that made me stay [is], maybe . . . my husband. I don't want to have a separated home, like living in Nigeria [without him]' (Oby/female/28).

The family appears to be a central issue in the return considerations of Gladys and Oby. Despite the different outcomes, their stories offer a window into how Nigerians in Guangzhou reckon with family concerns while contemplating return. In order to make the point about the role of the family in how married Nigerians contemplate return, however, it is crucial to highlight the broader contexts within which return consideration occur. I turn to this issue in the next section.

4.1 The context of experience and return migration in Guangzhou

Several macro-structural factors shape how Nigerians think about return migration, but some stand out in participants' stories, namely the general disposition and policies of the Chinese state, differences in living condition and business environment in China and Nigeria and integration problems. Although these factors form part of the everyday

experience in the city, they also force the participants to contemplate return with family featuring commonly in their narratives.

First, some of the participants believed that the general disposition of the Chinese state is unfriendly to the settlement of foreigners. According to Adeoye (male/54), the Chinese government '. . . is not really friendly for foreigners to come and live in the country.' Notably, the immigration policies that regulate the presence of foreigners makes return inevitable. Okocha (male/37) complained that '. . . we find it very difficult to cope with their policies. Not that it's too bad, but it will make you understand that you are here temporarily.' For example, housing rules in Guangzhou exclude migrants from some areas that the state designates as villages, from Xiaobei in Yuexiu district to Nanhai in Foshan district. Apart from housing exclusion, a community leader said that it is almost impossible for Nigerians to register a representative office in the city.[5] In the past, many Nigerians exploited this avenue to obtain a residence permit and were, through it, able to facilitate the entry of spouses. In his words, the Chinese government '. . . make things so difficult for people to live here, all in the name of trying to discourage them from having more black families here' (Baron/male/50).

Second, the perceived differences in the quality of life and business environment of China and Nigeria shape the context of return among the participants. In consonance with the structural perspective on return migration, which insists that return takes place within specific contextual and situational factors (Cassarino 2004), many participants believe that the economic situation of Nigeria will leave them worse-off. Nigerian migrants value the Chinese renminbi more than the Nigerian naira (Adeoye/male/54) and construct the 'hardship of China' as more tolerable than the 'suffering of Nigeria'. That is, '. . . people still want . . . to live [in China] with the hardship' (Ndubisi/male/32). In other words:

> Life is better for me over here, no matter how difficult it is. . . . After the day's suffering, when you get to your home, you have a good sleep, there's electricity . . . But over there in Nigeria after the whole day's stress, you go to your house and stress again. So, why should I rush to go home and stay? (Okocha/male/37)

Relatedly, the business environment of China is considered more conducive. Since most Nigerians in the city are businesspeople, involved in the trade, freight services, and export and import, staying put is considered economically beneficial.

Third, many Nigerians feel that they are poorly integrated into the city. This problem creates a sense of impermanence and forces participants to remain conscious of an impending return. The integration problem manifests as lack of, or limited economic and social opportunities, and un-belongingness. Indeed, participants shared many stories of return that were due to people's inability to find work. Okocha (male/37), for instance, reports that many friends that arrived in China with him were frustrated to leave because they were unable to secure a job. Although those without valid documents were most at risk of joblessness, those residing in China with a valid student, business, marriage, and asylum documents were not also allowed to work.[6] Moreover, there is no sense of permanence. The approach to the management of migrants by the state ensures that the length of stay did not count for long-term stayers given how they are treated the same way as newcomers. Okocha

(male/37) made this point when narrating that 'even if you have been here for 20 or 30 years, you and someone that arrived today . . . are the same'.

The final context of return is the orientation that participants hold towards their country of origin while abroad. Even though the majority of migrants do not follow through with return intentions (Sinatti 2011), they formulate emigration with the intention of return (Carling 2004). Most of the participants interviewed, irrespective of the duration of stay, have a plan to leave China eventually. Some hope to leave sooner than others, but they share in common the belief that they will return.[7] As one participant insists, 'When a man goes to look for something; after he finishes, he will *still* go back home. . . . A man will *still* go back home. I will *still* go back to my country' (Italicised for emphasis, Chukwuka/male/36). With firm determination to return home eventually, and other structural dynamics that shape return migration calculation of participants, return becomes an integral part of the everyday experience of living abroad.

It is worth noting, however, that these underlying contextual factors impact on the dynamics of return contemplation in different ways. For instance, while the disposition of the state, unfavourable policies and integration issues predispose participants to wish to exit China, the perceived improved living condition and business environment of Guangzhou were a strong negative factor on return migration. What this suggests is that in order to formulate return intention and crystallise it into a return decision, Nigerian migrants struggle to gauge the specific impacts and overall consequences of different structural opportunities and constraints in the origin and destination countries.

More interestingly, however, is how family issues and concerns mediate some of the underlying structural contexts of return. Here, the immigration policy, as a critical underlying context of return, is relevant. While the visa policy regulates the presence of foreigners and affects migrants' access to jobs, housing, and sense of being-in-the-world in Guangzhou, it also keeps migrants away from their families. Where this occurs, the family factor becomes a key component in how migrants reflect on return. I elaborate on this argument next.

4.2 Locating the family in return consideration among married Nigerians

Adeoye (male/54) obtained asylum from Beijing just before his visa expired. He has managed to maintain a presence in Guangzhou for more than four years without much disturbance, except that he is unable to invite his family to China and not legally permitted to work. Of course, the vibrant trading environment in Guangzhou has helped him to survive. Nevertheless, Adeoye yearns to be with his family. Unfortunately, it is not possible to exit China and travel to Nigeria without losing his asylum status. With the Chinese state being unresponsive to his plea for a regular status, Adeoye feels stuck and considers abandoning his asylum status and return to Nigeria. To quote him:

> I want to go back and see my family since you [the Chinese government] cannot allow my family to come here . . . They will say that my programme is not yet mature. So definitely I just need to go; I need to see them. I think it is a good excuse for me and they will not say no. (Adeoye/male/54)

Adeoye is not alone in placing family at the centre of return consideration, although the family factor does not operate in the same way for all the participants. In this section, I provide further explanations about how migrants foreground return consideration in family concerns. Specifically, I describe how the dynamics of gender, the proximity of family members and (un)belongingness affect how the participants think about the possibility of return.

4.2.1 With a family but living apart?: reckoning spatial proximity and return.

Although a vast majority of Nigerians in Guangzhou are young and unmarried men, there are a handful of older and married men as well. However, a lot of these married Nigerian men live in Guangzhou without their spouses and/or children. The distance between these Nigerian male migrants and their families creates a spatial proximity problem that renders permanent settlement impossible. Particularly with the 'China reality' falling short of pre-departure expectation, those who migrated in the hope that their families would later join them experience the distance problem for several years. Ahmed (male/45), for example, has been in Guangzhou for eight years when we met. When he left Nigeria, he had planned to relocate his family to China once he settles down. In anticipation of using his artisanal craft to make a living, Ahmed had assumed that:

> . . . China was like America or those other countries in the Western world, that if you get there within six months, you will be able to bring in your family to live together.

Unfortunately, the social, economic, and political realities of China made family unification unattainable. Lacking a valid immigration document to work and move freely between China and Nigeria, the distance between Ahmed (male/45) and his family had widened with time.

Other married Nigerian men experienced this spatial proximity problem. One of them, Buchi (male/50), is a 50-year-old medicine trader who has been 'married' for six years. Since he married, Buch and his spouse have only had virtual interactions, relying on the Internet-enabled mobile phone to exchange virtual kisses because 'there is no visa to come to China. [It] is very hard.' At age 50, Buchi is thinking about returning to Nigeria so that he can start a family and produce offspring. More so, like Ahmed, having an undocumented status complicates the possibility of bridging the distance that keeps Buchi away from his family. Unlike Ahmed and Buchi, those with valid immigration documents freely bridge the spatial proximity problem as they can return to Nigeria as circular migrants—even though the family could not be with them in China.[8]

Meanwhile, aside from the barrier to family unification, married Nigerian men who are fathers at the time interview raised concerns about 'absentee fatherhood'. Absentee fatherhood is a product of a geographically mediated materiality of father-offspring affective exchange. Those who think of absentee fatherhood as a problem worry about their children and long to be with them in the flesh. The distance between China and Nigeria constrains them, and unless they undertake a return journey, no alternative exists to bridge this materiality gap. Paradoxically, their status and the interpretations of the choices available to them in China will determine whether they return to Nigeria to correct fatherly absenteeism.

Specifically, undocumented absentee fathers are forced to prioritise between whether to return to Nigerian to see their children or stay put in China and secure the well-being of entire families. Generally, most of them value staying put as this safeguards the whole family as a collective. More crucially, staying put, rather than returning home because of the desire to be a 'present-ee father', corresponds with the internalised norms of masculine responsibility which prescribes that providing for one's family is a fundamental expectation in a marriage. Considering that a lot of undocumented Nigerians have not accomplished their goals in China, returning to 'be present' is perceived as unmanly. Manliness means being able to accomplish personal economic goals and aspiration as a migrant, regardless of how long it takes and the distance involved. Solo's (male/25) narrative is instructive for illuminating how, despite distance, returning can be an unmanly behaviour.

Although Solo entered China legally, he has lived in the city as undocumented since his 30-days visa expired. A few months after his arrival, his wife delivered a baby, but he cannot be there. While regretting not being around, he could not justify his return on the ground of absentee fatherhood. This is because he spent much money on visa procurement and a voluntary return is thus unthinkable. To him, '. . . you need to have what you are supposed to have as a man.' As he admits below:

> I am not so happy here because I have a wife. I have not seen my son since my wife gave birth to him – my first child . . . To go back home, you'll pay a fine. But to come back is not allowed because of paper issues. [So] for us to go back [to Nigeria], you need to have what you are supposed to have as a man. (Solo/ male/25)

The quote above suggests that although some married Nigerian men who live apart from their spouses/children contemplate returning, securing the same families requires that they stay put in China. Because of this, absentee fatherhood persists, and the condition can last for much longer if they are unable to find a means to bridge the spatial proximity gap by bring their family legally to China or taking the alternative route of returning to Nigeria.

4.2.2 Living together but fearing separation: marital relations and child upbringing in return consideration.

As shown in Table 1, a small majority resides in Guangzhou without their spouses/children. However, 11 participants—or 44 per cent—live with their family in Guangzhou, among which are Nigerians who are married to other Nigerian migrants. For this group, the problem of absentee fatherhood is a less serious concern. Despite the advantage of living together, however, the participants still contemplate return with family factor remaining significant in their contemplation. Three issues connect return and family among them: family separation, cost of educating children in Guangzhou, and perceived future competitiveness of children trained in Chinese schools.

To start, while some of the participants think about leaving China, they fear that it will lead to family separation. This concern is gendered. Typically, African women's population in Guangzhou is small, and this is the case with Nigerian women too, despite being the most populous African group. Also, many Nigerian women are family migrants who moved initially to China to be with their Nigerian husbands and start a family. However,

some of them think about returning to Nigeria but were constrained to stay back because of their family. Staying put is, for these women, a strategy to prevent family separation. A clear example of this fear of separation is noticeable in the story of Chukwura (female/35) who began to consider going back to Nigeria because she is dissatisfied with her life in China.

Before Chukwura came to be with her husband about 10 years ago, she was a Medical Laboratory Scientist with ambition, an ambition that vanished when she came to China. She entered China with a Ghanaian passport, which, in her view, made her a ghost. With two children and another one on the way, Chukwura had abandoned her ambition to become a trader—selling women's clothes. While she enjoys being married and close to her family, she confides that:

> If not for the marriage that brought me here, I regretted coming. It is as if I am retarded. [Still] just the way I left Nigeria. The only good thing is that God has blessed me with a home. . . . I just imagine myself, what it would have been like if I am in Nigeria. (Chukwura/female/35)

With this frustration, she feels that if she lives in Nigeria, her life would be much better. I probed to know why she felt this way and could not continue on her career path, she confides that apart from her face on the international passport (a Ghanaian passport though she's Nigerian), nothing in her 'being-in-China' is authentically hers: fake name, fake nationality, and a fake history which she had built for the past nine years. She longed to return home to rebuild. Yet, Chukwura's return depends on the trajectory and place of residence of her family, because, in her words, 'I do not like a *separated home*. . . . I will be leaving with my family as I do not believe in *raising children alone*' (Italicised for emphasis, Chukwura/ female/35).

Besides the return contemplation that is bridged by women's subscription to family/marriage values, Nigerians with families in Guangzhou contemplate return because of concern about access to, and cost and quality of education in Chinese schools. Whereas some of them are unable to enrol their children, others complained about the high cost of fees. One of the women I interviewed has two children, one of whom is a girl and of a school age. Because she and her husband could not find a school for her, they acquired YouTube videos and educational video compact disks in place of a school. If the situation does not change for the better, this will be the basis for returning to Nigeria.

Besides, Nigerian parents experience difficulty in getting socio-culturally appropriate early childhood education for their children and are troubled about the life chances of China-trained Nigerian children. They believe that the current opportunities for child education offer a limited prospect for social advancement beyond Chinese society. In essence, Nigerian parents want their children to be competitive and perceive that educating them in the Chinese language is not a good foundation for future competitiveness. Again, as Chukwura (female/35) tells me, 'I cannot see them [the children] having a good future here [in China].'

In reckoning return and placing family at its centre, therefore, Nigerian parents who live together in Guangzhou are constrained to re-prioritise, at times putting the need of the children above their own. The perceived educational opportunities of children in China made them consider if return is the most reasonable—and at times the only—

option. In this situation, migrant anticipate return migration in alignment with the prospects of their children.

4.2.3 Home first: (un)belongingness, family, and return.   Beside the Nigerians who married other Nigerians and have their families residing in Nigeria, China or a third country, some Nigerian men married Chinese women, have biracial children and live with them as a family in Guangzhou. Intermarriage between Chinese men and African women is unusual. However, many African men, including Nigerians, marry Chinese women. Some Nigerians in such interracial union are members of the Nigerian–Chinese Family Forum (NCFF). The NCFF was established to deal with problems arising from the growing interracial marriages between Nigerian men and their Chinese wives. Unlike those who married Nigerian women, Nigerian men who married Chinese are more optimistic about life in China. As one of them tells me: '. . . we are going towards that permanent stay because things are changing and it will continue to change [in China]' (Chimeze/male/40).

Provided that the husband and wife can set up a business that earns good returns, Nigerian–Chinese couples did not perceive raising children and maintaining a presence in the city as serious problems. Moreover, with the health insurance of the Chinese wife, giving birth to interracial children in the hospital is less complicated, as far the birth has not exceeded the approved limit set by the state. We can say the same about schooling as the government subsidises public schools for 'legal' children.[9] Nevertheless, some Nigerian men in interracial relationship feel that they are poorly integrated into the city.

Nigerian men who married a Chinese complain about institutional barriers in accessing residence permit and have challenges with educating their children, both of which make them think about return. For instance, despite having marriage visas, some men live in the city from quarter to quarter or from year to year. They are never sure if their visa renewal application will be approved the next time they visit the immigration office. Consequently, these men keep return on the horizon, believing that they will leave China eventually, either to retire or until they are forced to leave because of residence permit issues.

The feeling of (un)belongingness also becomes apparent when a participant talks about the cost of raising children. In this particular case, the Nigerian is married to a Chinese woman who had initially migrated to Guangzhou from another part of China, and thus has limited access to government social protection.[10] Therefore, the Nigerian–Chinese couples pay for services that they could have enjoyed at little or no cost. Without access to state welfare for training his children, therefore, a Nigerian parent feels that he is unattached and has no incentive to commit his children to China. In his words:

> You see this Chinese government . . . they don't give us any benefit and it makes me strong . . . When it is time for us to leave this country, the person that does not help me in training my kids cannot tell me that my kids should stay back [to China]. (Ola/male/45)

A look at their transnational practices suggests that, indeed, Nigerians in marital relations with Chinese women and who feel less integrated in Guangzhou have always prepared for return. When probed about his housing choice and decision to buy land in Nigeria, for

example, one participant gives a narration of what he considered a prudent decision in the following exposition:

> I had the opportunity to buy a house here, but the truth is still the truth: you must think home first before you think about this place. That is when you are the man of the family. (Chimeze/male/40)

Chimeze and other four Nigerian men who married Chinese practice transnationalism in this way. These men married their Chinese spouses for many years and have between two and three children at the time of interview. With their business and relatively stable lives in Guangzhou, return migration was not urgent, but it was a certainty. Land investment qualifies as a strongly transnational practice (Osili 2004; Carling and Pettersen 2014) and communicates migrants' return orientation more directly.

To abbreviate, I have shown that Nigerians who live with their spouses/children in Guangzhou reckon return and family differently as compared with those whose families reside in Nigeria or a third country. Those with families in Nigeria complain about being too distant from their family, with the challenge of unification and absentee fatherhood being major sources of concern. However, Nigerian couples who live in Guangzhou as a family think about return as a possibility given the high cost of raising children and the negative evaluation of the future competitiveness of their children as 'China-educated'. More so, some Nigerian women worry about the limited opportunity for social mobility in China, making it an uncomfortable place to live permanently. But when contemplating return, going back to Nigeria is not an option if such decision would lead to family separation. What is more, the feeling of (un)belongingness resonates with Nigerians in interracial marital relationship with Chinese women. The reality of the family factor seems apparent when narrating their poor experiences with access to residence permit and the social welfare package that they are unable to access through their wives' citizenship.

5. Conclusion

I analysed how Nigerian migrants reckon with family issues while contemplating return migration in Guangzhou. Participants routinely contemplate return migration, and family matters are critical in this process. A critical observation is that family factors can influence and orient return consideration and, as other scholars have suggested (Arowolo 2000; Flahaux and Reeve 2015), return is connected to the initial reason for which emigration was undertaken. For both males and females, family concern is important at pre-departure phase. Women especially moved to China to be with their husbands and were thus conditioned to remain 'fixed-in-place' in Guangzhou. The joint influence of family issues on the return consideration of married Nigerians takes family attachment and commitment beyond the domain of women, as Elijah (2013) tends to suggest. Elijah (2013) had argued that family influences were more pronounced among females than male migrants because of the women's natural maternal, domestic, and conjugal roles. I suggest, however, that both male and female ground return consideration in family issues: women worry about keeping the family together, while men worry about how to get spouses to join them abroad.

In agreement with the structural view of return migration, which emphasises the role of situational and structural factors in origin and destination countries in shaping return, rather than personal or psychological factors (Cassarino 2004), China's receiving context has dynamics that force Nigerian migrants to confront the reality of an imminent return. Moreover, the dynamics of gender, proximity of family members, and (un)belongingness shape how participants integrate family issues in return migration calculation. However, as a factor in return, family consideration plays a dual role in that it constitutes a reason to move and not to move at the same time. This claim is affirmed without neglecting the fact that none of the study participants planned to stay in China indefinitely.

China's migration context provides different theoretical opportunities and challenges. For instance, unlike the Western countries, the promise of full integration is uncertain in China, even for long-term stayers and those who married Chinese citizens. Contrary to Poppe et al. (2016) who writes that concern about children makes African migrants 'stay put', Nigerians in China feel that their children will have a better chance in life if they go to school in Nigeria. Even with the transformations taking place in traditional destinations in Europe and the USA, the dream of full integration is probably more alive there than in China where nothing is guaranteed, and immigration laws are yet incoherent and susceptible to rapid changes (Lan 2014; Castillo 2015; Haugen 2015).

The role of the family in return consideration can be useful for thinking about the processual and dynamic nature of return migration. In the case of China especially, it introduces the notion of generation-determined adjustment of aspiration whereby migrants move, for instance, to maximise earning and improve their lives, but evolve a return strategy in response to an aspiration they envision for their children. So, rather than basing a return calculation entirely on their personal aspirations, the 'envisioned-aspiration' for children becomes paramount. The question is, analytically, can we separate the aspiration of a parent from those of children? Alternatively, should we think of parent–children aspirations as the same, so that return calculations made in anticipation of children's future well-being is not to be disentangled from the aspirations and well-being of parents themselves? Future research can illuminate some of these questions.

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Notes

1. Mr Basil Ukaere, ex-President of the Nigerian Community in China, Guangzhou, 2017.
2. See https://uturnasia.com/2016/01/24/test-1/. Also, Kuo (2016) and Marsh (2016), respectively, report on how African returnees are trying to burst the 'myth of China as a promised land' and the ways others are giving up on the 'Chinese dream' due to the problems of joblessness, failed onward migration, worsening visa regime and racism.
3. The category 'married' should be treated with caution as some of those who claimed the status are only cohabiting with a partner.
4. A boss or one's husband (when used by a woman to describe her spouse).
5. Baron (male/50).
6. Oby (female/28); Adeoye (male/54).
7. While a few want to use China as a springboard to move onto another country, majority hope to return to Nigeria and retire, including those married to Chinese women.
8. An example is Obinna, (male/35) who returns home periodically to be with his wife.
9. Interviews with Chimeze and Ola who married Chinese woman, Guangzhou, 2017.
10. *Hukou* is a social protection programme through which the Chinese government provide assistance and welfare to citizens of China, from housing to healthcare and education. However, the programme is designed to prevent those with rural hukou from accessing welfare in urban areas. The Chinese state uses the programme to control rural–urban migration.

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