

Global migration and intermarriage in Chinese-Hungarian context¹

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Introduction

This anthropological paper scrutinizes life events narrated by a middle aged Hungarian woman married to a Chinese wholesale tradesman for almost thirty years. The conversation with her opened up a window to several decades of the life of a Chinese-Hungarian mixed marriage and mixed family challenged regularly by apparently irreconcilable notions of marriage, family, and love; notions shaped by the spouses' different sociocultural backgrounds.

I shall call this woman Susan and I refer to her husband as Zhang. These are not their real names. In an attempt to protect their identity I changed their names as well as some other particularly revealing details of their lives. The interview with Susan had two sessions, provided a large and rich text that sheds light on a so far unexplored group of phenomena. This interview provided deep insights into the intimate borderland between Chinese migrants and members of the Hungarian host society.

Tracing Susan and Zhang's relationship from its genesis in the isolated cold war era to the globalised present, migrants' transnational practices appear as factors shaping mixed marriage experience and intimacy in a fundamental way. Susan's ethnographically rich account reflects elaborately on how distance and closeness is created and manifested in cultural terms revealing the dynamics of exchange and emotion in their relationship.

The wider context of the topic is inseparable from the contemporary phenomenon of international migration. The interpretation of this particular couple's experiences are combined with and integrated into the results of a piece of anthropological research on Chinese-Hungarian mixed couples, an inquiry that explores an intimate aspect of Chinese migrants' presence and integration in Hungary³. The discussion is based on data gathered through fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with members of married, cohabiting and dating couples as well as members of separated or divorced couples, and to a lesser extent on online ethnography and online content analysis. Referring to similar attempts in the EU⁴ the research project has aimed at setting up a relationship typology. It studies how spatial mobility and transnational practices shape the lives of mixed marriage-based families. Furthermore, it has explored notions and values that are at play in shaping the dynamics of these relations.

Susan and Zhang's story

By the time Susan met her would-be husband Zhang in East Africa in 1987 she probably kept no memory of the vow she made at age thirteen never to marry a Hungarian man. Susan, a highly qualified and reflective intellectual graduated from a top Hungarian university, recalled it later when she was trying to make sense of her nearly three decades of married life. It was her second study period in East Africa when she, 27 at the time, entered in a relationship with Zhang, a twenty-year old man from Southwest China, sent there by the PRC as part of his training to become a Chinese diplomat in Africa. Susan got pregnant shortly after they met. Chinese authorities considered Zhang's intimate affair with Susan a potential jeopardy and sent him back to Beijing where, according to Susan's story, he was kept in

¹ The project received support from Hungarian National Research Fund – OTKA K-112282.

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³ Kovács, Nóra: Cultures unfolding. Experiences of Chinese-Hungarian mixed couples in Hungary. In: *Current Issues in Personality Psychology* Volume 3(4), 2015, pp. 254-264.

⁴ Gaspar, Sofia: Comparing EU bi-national partnerships in Spain and Italy 1. In: *Sociologia On Line*, 2, 2011, pp. 101-119. (Retrieved from Research Gate on 10 August 2015).

home custody for nearly a year. Susan returned to her parents' home from Africa and she gave birth to their first child in 1988. Zhang's escape from China to Hungary in January, 1989 coincided with the beginning of the three-year period when Hungary's borders were opened to Chinese citizens and when tens of thousands of Chinese migrants arrived in Hungary with an entrepreneurial spirit.

Susan's young Chinese partner, Zhang also moved in with her parents in a small town close to the capital in 1989. Their coexistence started badly and continued worse. Susan's mother disliked Zhang from the moment he arrived. Susan recalled her mum slapping at Zhang's hands when he opened the pantry door or the chest of drawers. Susan, Zhang and their one-year-old moved to a rented apartment, the first in a long series of temporary homes in the suburbia of the capital city.

According to Susan's story, it was a piece of advice from Chinese acquaintances of Zhang's in Hungary and a subsequent family mobility decision that made eight-month-pregnant Susan the very last Hungarian refugee in an Austrian refugee camp in September, 1989, months after the 1951 Geneva refugee convention was signed by Hungary. Two other important life events occurred during their stay in Austria: she had their second child in the camp and, under some pressure from camp authorities, they got married officially. After a physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging year of married life in the refugee camp Susan returned to Hungary with their children, while Zhang stayed on in Austria to work as a blue collar employee of a local company, visiting his wife and children on a regular basis.

Back in Hungary Susan earned the family's living, including their rent, as a freelance professional. While working in Austria Zhang made efforts to learn German and tried to convince Susan to send their children to China to live with his parents for a couple of years, a proposal Susan kept rejecting categorically whenever the issue came up. The couple's third child was born in 1993.

It was the arrival of his brother from China in the same year that set Zhang on the career track of the typical Chinese entrepreneur of the 1990s in Hungary. Together with his brother they opened a series of shops all over the country and beyond its borders, and their business prospered. The brothers' father aged 68 at the time arrived from China to live with Zhang's family and to assist his sons in their enterprise. Coexistence with her father-in-law resulted in a never ending conflict for Susan. As a result, Zhang and his father left the family home and moved to a nearby small town characterized by a dominantly working class population, a feature Susan considered relevant in their choice of location. This incident loosened the link between Zhang and his Hungarian family to a certain extent; nevertheless he paid regular visits to the family and the couples twins were born in 1998. According to Susan's account, these visits often led to confrontations between Zhang and his wife or children, often about issues related to what to spend money on. It was years later when Susan learned that Zhang had a series of liaisons, mostly with Hungarian women, following the years he and his father moved out.

An important episode took place the year after the twins were born. In 1999 Zhang made an attempt to move his wife and children to China planned for at least one year, possibly longer. Zhang's reasons and considerations behind this project are also known from Susan's side. It seems that he wanted to make up for his children's Chinese language education, an area abandoned up to that point. Suitcases packed with Hungarian schoolbooks for a year Susan took a plane to China with her children to meet Zhang at Beijing Airport. The family returned to Hungary in less than three weeks. Susan's elaborate sub-narrative gives a detailed account of how and why the project failed.

Having returned from China Zhang continued to reside away from his family and his visits became more sporadic and less foreseeable, however, until about 2004 he did have a bed in the family home that Susan managed to purchase in the end. Susan and her children's

relationship with Zhang was continually deteriorating until another significant event occurred. In 2011 Susan's father-in-law aged 85 decided to move back to China definitively. One of Zhang's employees encouraged him to assist the church services of a neo-Christian sect in his town of residence, a development that may be associated with his renewed interest in visiting his practically separated wife and children more frequently. Shortly before our last interview was made in 2014 Zhang made an explicit attempt to get back with Susan.

Year	Events in Susan and Zhang's lives
1959	Susan is born in a small conservative town into a lower-middle class family, her parents originating from small, remote village communities.
1967	Zhang is born in Southwest China into a poor, lower class family of workers living in a marriage preceded by forced divorces and arranged forcefully by state authorities.
1987	Susan and Zhang meet in Africa, engage in a relationship, Susan gets pregnant and returns to Hungary, Zhang is sent back to China and kept in home custody in Beijing.
1988	Their first child is born in Hungary.
1989	Zhang joins Susan and his child in Hungary. They go to Austria as refugees, they marry and their second child is born in a refugee camp
1990-1994	Zhang is employed in Austria as a blue collar worker, commutes monthly to Hungary.
1990	Susan returns to Hungary with their children.
1993	Zhang's brother migrates to Hungary to start a business and proposes to his brother to work together. Zhang returns to live in Hungary and the brothers open a series of shops. Susan and Zhang's third child is born.
1995	Zhang's father arrives to live with Susan and Zhang. This generates a serious conflict and Zhang and his father move out. Susan alone provides for her children although Zhang's business prospers.
1998	The couple's twins are born.
1999	The family makes a failed attempt to get settled in China.
1999-2011	Zhang has a series of love affairs with Hungarian women.
2011	Zhang's father returns to China.
2014	Zhang joins a neo-Christian religious sect and makes attempts to get back with his wife and family.

Table 1. Susan and Zhang: Key dates and events

Chinese migrants in Hungary

Several aspects of the Chinese diaspora, the most numerous visibly non-Hungarian immigrant group in Hungary, have already been explored by the mid-2010s. What differentiates this population from other Chinese diasporas in Western Europe or North America is its less than three decades of history and its specific business profile that can be associated with much lower levels of integration and local language acquisition, particularly so in the case of the first generation. Chinese citizens needed no visa to enter Hungary between 1989 and 1992 and their numbers reached neared forty thousand by the late 1990s. Establishing retail networks they provided Hungarians with cheap consumer goods, a process described by Pál Nyíri⁵. He interpreted Chinese tradesmen's role played in Hungarian society as that of a "middleman minority", a concept introduced by Jonathan Turner and Edna Bonacich in 1980. The concept of middleman minority refers to migrants who, based on cross border ethnic networks, occupy institutionalised positions in certain well-defined areas of the economy between the highest and the lowest strata of society, while they stay outside social hierarchy since they are foreigners. This is an important idea that has a bearing on the formation of partner relationships between Chinese migrants and members of the host society⁶. According to a more recent study focusing on the Chinese business model in Hungary, regional wholesale activities have become dominant in case of the more successful Chinese entrepreneurs⁷.

The changing economic and legal environment in Hungary may have contributed to a substantial drop in their numbers by the mid-2010s. In 2015 there were an estimated fifteen thousand Chinese citizens living and working in Hungary. Demographically, the Chinese migrants formed a relatively young and educated, gender-balanced population in Hungary equipped with the social capital of transnational networks. Thus the "typical" Chinese migrant of the early 1990s to Hungary could be of either sex, aged around twenty five coming from any part of mainland China, likely to have completed some formal education including a college degree. But she or he would pursue commercial activities and would show limited interest in learning Hungarian. Most of them chose the capital, Budapest as their place of residence. Besides commercial units, shops, markets, food stands and restaurants, dozens of immigrant Chinese organisations and institutions have been formed since the early 1990s⁸.

The linguistic position and degree of integration of the second generation of Chinese migrants in Hungary are very different from that of their parents. A piece of anthropological research has recently explored several aspects of second generation Chinese identity in Hungary, with a special emphasis on the hybridity of the second generation's so-called banana identity⁹. Using life history interview as a technique, a comparative international project focused on the patterns of integration and attitudes towards migrant women, including

⁵ Nyíri, Pál: Chinese in Eastern Europe and Russia: A Middleman Minority in a Transnational Era. (Chinese Worlds) Routledge: London and New York 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Várhalmi, Zoltán: Vállalkozó migránsok Magyarországon. In: Kováts, András ed.: Bevándorlás és integráció. Magyarországi adatok, európai indikátorok. MTA Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont: Budapest 2013, pp. 89-100.

⁸ Kováts, András: Migráns szervezetek Magyarországon. Kutatási zárótanulmány. MTA Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont, Kisebbségkutató Intézet: Budapest 2012, 60 p.

⁹ Beck, Fanni: De ha a tükörbe nézek, az arcom kínai. Másodgenerációs kínai fiatalok hibrid identitáskonstrukciói. MAKAT Antroport: Budapest 2015, 59. p.

a sample of Chinese migrant women in Hungary¹⁰. The school experiences of Chinese children in Hungary have also been studied in a comparative context by a group of anthropologists¹¹.

Chinese-Hungarian partner relationships – background

Until recently the intimate relationships between Chinese migrants and Hungarians have not been targeted specifically. A first research report of the current research project on intimate relations between Chinese migrants and Hungarians discussed interethnic partner relationships¹².

There is extensive literature in demography, sociology, social anthropology and migration research that discusses issues relevant to the study of Chinese-Hungarian mixed relationships. Three branches of literature have proved to be particularly helpful in the attempt to understand and handle this phenomenon: studies on Chinese society, especially on changing family relations; migration studies with a focus on mixed marriage as a factor of migrants' integration; and sociological relationship studies that include notions of race, culture or transnationality in their analyses.

An attempt to understand the inner dynamics of Chinese-Hungarian mixed partner relationships in Hungary is inseparable from the conceptual framework of "transnational anthropology" with a simultaneous focus on two or more locations, social networks, and discourse and symbol systems affecting migrants' lives. The focus in migration research thus shifted from assimilation models, the melting pot theory, and second generation culture change towards the study of simultaneous economic, family and cultural ties of diasporas with two or more locations or countries¹³, a daily reality of migrants' ethnically mixed marriages.

Matthijs Kalmijn found that theories of partner choice provide important clues to the causes of intermarriage¹⁴. Literature has also approached intermarriage as a channel of immigrant integration. A study based on registry data from thirty-nine immigrant groups in Sweden stresses the differences between immigration patterns and immigrant integration in the US and Europe¹⁵. Two of their statements draw the attention to important aspects of the phenomenon studied. They emphasize that there are differences between immigrant groups in terms of family culture, family systems, kin relations, and marriage customs; and that these are highly persistent over time¹⁶. Their results of Kalmijn and van Tubergen¹⁷ concerning the role of cultural factors in endogamy are in line with those of Dribe and Lundh. Sofia Gaspar's attempt to elaborate an international migrant marriage typology for a Western European context proved to be a good point of departure to set up Chinese-Hungarian relationship typology. Matthijs Kalmijn's work on intermarriage in the Netherlands

By surveying nearly two thousand Chinese married couples about their marital relations and the quality of their marriage, Ellen Efron Pimentel provides a vivid picture of

¹⁰ Kovács, Éva / Melegh, Attila eds.: „Azt hittem célt tévesztettem” A bevándorló nők élettörténeti perspektívái, integrációja és a bevándorlókkal kapcsolatos attitűdök nyolc európai országban. KSH Népelemszámítási és Statisztikai Intézet: Budapest 2010.

¹¹ Feischmidt, Margit / Nyíri, Pál eds.: Nem kívánt gyerekek? Külföldi gyerekek magyar iskolákban [Unwanted children? Foreign children in Hungarian schools]. MTA Nemzeti-Etnikai Kisebbségkutató Intézet / Nemzetközi Migrációs és Menekültügyi Kutatóközpont: Budapest 2006.

¹² Kovács, N. 2015.

¹³ Basch et. al. 1994.

¹⁴ Kalmijn 1998.

¹⁵ Dribe, Martin / Lundh, Christer: Intermarriage and immigrant integration in Sweden: An exploratory analysis. In: Acta Sociologica, 51, 2008, pp. 329-354.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kalmijn 2005.

Chinese marriages in an urban setting at the end of the 20th century¹⁸. “Can a common set of assumptions about the marital relationship be applied to different societies?”, she formulates one of her central questions regarding Beijing marriages¹⁹. Pimentel points out that “historically the conjugal bond took a distant second place to intergenerational ties between parents and children, especially sons”, and that “marriage was universal and utilitarian, conducted for the purposes of having children and furthering the larger family group”²⁰. During the 20th century, however, ideas about marital relations in China have changed greatly. Pimentel concludes that parental approval seemed to affect marriage quality strongly and the Chinese couples seemed to share a relatively unromantic vision of love²¹.

Chinese-Hungarian partner relationships – a project overview

The research on Chinese-Hungarian inter-ethnic partner relationships discussed in this paper was driven by the general assumption of literature on Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Hungary that there are few of such bonds in spite that there is no explicit norm of endogamy valid among Chinese migrants²². It has to be noted that practices related with the norms of endogamy should be seen differently in the partner choice of first generation young adult migrants arriving and living on their own in Hungary than those of the second generation Chinese youth living in Hungary under close surveillance of their family. Moreover, a distinction has to be made between temporary dating periods and formalised long-term commitment. My fieldwork data suggests that the former is often allowed whereas the latter is often discouraged by parents of Chinese youth in Hungary.

One aim of the current research was to explore whether the assumption concerning the low incidence of this phenomenon held, and if it did what factors accounted for it. My principal focus of interest was the first generation of Chinese migrants. Until January 2016 I spotted thirty-nine such bonds through my personal network of acquaintances and as part of a fieldwork conducted in the Chinese-Hungarian encounter zone where Chinese migrants and Hungarians meet outside spaces of commerce at universities and in language schools, tai chi and kung fu trainings, tea houses, and Chinese medical service providers. Online fieldwork was also conducted. I tried to gather as much basic demographic data on the persons and relationships as possible and also attempted to make interviews. Up to the present fifteen formal interviews concerning Chinese-Hungarian mixed partnerships were conducted. In three cases both partners in a relationship were willing to participate. More persons were contacted from the list and some information was obtained from them regarding their relationship without actually conducting an interview. Out of the un-interviewed relations, uneven and fragmented but rich qualitative information was gathered on eighteen couples from third parties and from the internet; and uneven, fragmented and scarce information became available on twelve relationships.

Talking to Hungarians connected in one form or another with Chinese persons in Hungary I encountered two contradicting stereotypes about the composition of these relationships. Some were convinced that it was exclusively Chinese women dating Hungarian men; others held the view that it was always Chinese men forming unions with Hungarian women. My accidental sample turned to be gender balanced with nearly half of the Chinese partners being men. The interviewees belonged to very different age groups from twenty-seven to eighty-three, the relationships ranged from a shorter dating period to an exceptional

¹⁸ Efron Pimentel, Ellen: Just how do I love Thee?: Marital relations in urban China. In: *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2000, pp. 32-47.

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibid* p. 33.

²¹ *Ibid* p. 44.

²² Nyíri 2006, p. 44.

case of fifty years of marriage. There were cases of marriage, divorce, separation, distance relationship among the interviewed partnerships. The majority of the thirty-nine Chinese partners do not represent the “typical Chinese migrant entrepreneur” of the 1990s, only sixteen out of the thirty-nine dedicate themselves to commerce or restaurants. Most of the others are educated professionals who are employees or work freelance.

To sum up some of the results, the persistence in time of a relationship seems to be different depending on whether the Chinese member of a couple is male or female. Based on the cases encountered during this research, the relationship is more persistent in time if the Chinese partner is female. Chinese-Hungarian intimate bonds outline two basic categories. Relationships of the “typical Chinese migrant” generally involve not only important cultural, but also large educational and social distance between the parties and are likely to become less successful. Relationships called “student love” provided the majority in the sample of this study. The category was labelled after a shared university study period in Hungary, China, or a third country. Affection and romantic engagement played a role in the Chinese partner’s mobility. Chinese-Hungarian “Student love” relationships tend to be more harmonious and more persistent in time.²³

Methodological considerations about the presentation of research results

A unique story

Susan and Zhang’s story is a very special one among the cases of Chinese-Hungarian partner relationships encountered during this research project. It started years before the first wave of Chinese migrants arrived in Hungary. Susan and Zhang met in an exotic third world country as fellow students before the fall of the iron curtain. Pressed by family circumstances, at one point they chose to become refugees, a decision the overwhelming majority of Chinese migrants to Hungary would never have made. Although heavily loaded with conflict and periodical separation, and likely to finally end in divorce, their marriage produced five children and lasted nearly three decades.

In spite of its uniqueness and its extreme features, it offers itself for the discussion of several issues considered relevant to the understanding of the workings and dynamics of intimate relationships between Chinese migrants and Hungarians. The case of Susan and Zhang is an example of the “typical” Chinese migrant’s relationship since after the initial attempts to study or work as an employee, Zhang’s professional career shows the pattern of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs. Her account of their relationship revealed how cultural and socio-emotive difference and large social distance between a Chinese husband and a Hungarian wife may contribute to a state of extended crisis and uncertainty. Susan’s insights may contribute to an explanation of why there have been relatively few successful Chinese-Hungarian mixed partner-relationships between the “typical Chinese migrants” of the 1990s to Hungary and members of the host society. By comparing and contrasting certain aspects of Susan and Zhang’s lives to those of the other couples studied, central issues like personal motives to enter into a relationship, transnational practices, language strategies, culturally embedded notions of the family, and the role of filial piety in a mixed marriage and family are going to be discussed.

Missing information

Several types of data insufficiency had to be handled during the analysis and interpretation of research results. Empirical research on the Chinese diaspora has proved to be challenging because of migrants’ very long working hours, communication difficulties, and a general preference on migrants’ part not to participate in any type of research. Some potential interviewees could not be convinced to talk. Incomplete but in certain areas rich qualitative

²³ Kovács, N. 2015.

information was gathered about some of the couples from newspapers, television documentaries, internet sites, and the social media.

In the majority of the cases found it was only one of the partners willing to participate in this research. So the views expressed are often not counterbalanced by the partner's version of the relationship. In Susan and Zhang's case it is obviously "her" version of their marriage that is presented here. I had no better option than presenting a one-sided picture, her version of their story, her lived experiences. I tried to explore the Chinese side, too, but Susan was convinced that Zhang would never agree to an interview about this topic. Throughout the fieldwork period I found men, and especially Chinese men, less willing to talk about personal affairs.

The narrative process and its interpersonal context

In spite of the relatively high rejection rate during this research project I made several interviews, but very few of them reached similar ethnographic depths as the sessions of conversation with Susan. I felt I learned much from it but also felt that the customary analysis of lexical content wouldn't help me grab enough layers of this phenomenon. While trying to handle this problem I've been inspired by an article authored by Katherine Pratt Ewing. Drawing on insights from sociolinguistics and psychoanalysis she draws the attention to several factors (contextual cues, indexicals, emotional transference and countertransference in the interview situation) to take into account when the researcher wants to turn his or her intuition about a topic into systematic analysis²⁴.

During our encounters solidarity and attunement were created as she knew of my personal experiences of having lived in a mixed marriage and this counterbalanced our uneven positions of power within the interview situation (me prompting, she revealing intimate aspects of her life). As to how the context of our ethnographic encounter was created and how this interview turned out, it is important to tell that it was a mutual friend and former professor who recommended that I should talk to Susan. The shared part of our academic history and the reference to our mutual friend from academia made Susan to take an academic standpoint and have an objective, somewhat distanced look at her own life experience. She gave the impression that the interview situation created for her a new possibility to reflect on different stages of her life with Zhang by turning them into narrations.

Discussion - some factors influencing the dynamics of Chinese-Hungarian partner relationships

Personal motives to enter relationship

In her own interpretation of her marriage Susan's choice of Zhang as her husband is inseparable from her family context of racism and prejudice and her opposition to it. She started her lifelong dispute with her father who came from a closed traditional village community where Susan and her sister were sent regularly for summer holidays. She was categorically banned from playing with Gypsy kids in the village. She and her father argued about issues of racism and discrimination against Gypsies and Jews all their lives, at one point cutting off communication for more than a decade.

Rebellious attitude or not and regardless of the tradesman's career that Zhang finally followed, Susan and Zhang first met in a university context similarly to the majority of the cases interviewed and similarly to the majority of those relationships in the sample that are relatively persistent in time and relatively more harmonious. A typical Chinese tradesman in his early fifties living in Hungary found his younger Hungarian partner at an online

²⁴ Pratt Ewing, Katherine: Revealing and Concealing: Interpersonal Dynamics and the Negotiation of Identity in the Interview. In: *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 34 (1), 2006, pp. 89-122.

Hungarian dating site where they kept corresponding for more than a year before they first met. Although previously considered an important motive behind mixed partner relationships, the attraction of the “exotic other” as a motivating factor appeared only once, in the account of a middle-aged Hungarian man who found perfect beauty when he first cast eyes on his Chinese partner and decided to conquer her. Contemplating the choice of Chinese tradesmen as potential partners one of my Hungarian female informants referred to the constraints of the partner-market saying that “they [Chinese men at the markets and stores] are at least different from the typical Hungarian guy with a bear in one hand and television remote control in the other. It’s something new you may find in him.”

Susan, three other Hungarian female interviewees, and also a Hungarian male interviewee spontaneously referred to themselves as inherently conservative in terms of traditional gender roles in the family and in terms of values related to the unity of the family and personal efforts to achieve it. All four of them connected their conservative family background to their choice of a Chinese man as partner. Likeness regarding these values, one of the bases of initial engagement in a relationship, turned out to be a double-edged blade working against the integrity of these interethnic bonds in several cases.

Filial piety, family and marriage in the context of interethnic partner relationships

Various aspects of the influence of the Chinese indigenous ethos of filial piety and the related norm of respect to be paid to elders and authorities are discussed widely in literature on Chinese society and family²⁵. This norm holds differently in the behaviour of different social and geographical groups in China²⁶. Filial piety seems to have an important bearing on the formation, development, persistence and quality of Chinese-Hungarian intimate bonds, the more so, the larger the socio-cultural gap is between the partners. Susan and Zhang’s case provides an extreme example of this. From Susan’s viewpoint Zhang’s filial duties towards his elderly father, a bond apparently unaccompanied by European versions of affection and closeness between father and son, became Zhang’s highest priority ever since his father arrived to stay in Hungary. Accompanying, housing, financing his father and prioritising his wishes and needs against those of his wife and children resulted in conflict, separation, and a trust deficiency not only between the spouses but also between Zhang and his children.²⁷

Duties towards the Chinese partner’s parents appeared in some of the interviews, although they were seen and treated differently depending on what relationship category the bond fit. Let me refer again to the two categories, “student love” and the “relationship of the typical Chinese migrant”, mentioned earlier. Practices related to filial piety were reported as causes of family tension or conflict in cases of the latter category. “Student love” migrants handled these duties with more ease and reacted to challenges with close cooperation. In one case where both partners were interviewed the married couple with two children often referred to the preparations they made to be able to house the wife’s retired parents who would come to live with them in Hungary indefinitely. A specific subgroup of “love migrants” within the sample is characterized by high qualifications with multiple language skills and a high degree of job-related international mobility. Tensions or conflict related to the duties of filial piety in cases of the couples belonging to this category seem to have been missing altogether.

²⁵ See for example Cong / Silverstein 2008, and Naftali 2009.

²⁶ Naftali 2009, pp. 99-100.

²⁷ During the years Zhang’s father resided in Hungary two of Zhang’s siblings also lived there, one of them working closely together as an associate, Zhang being the only one with a spouse and family. Susan recalled several incidents when the brothers, well into their thirties, competed violently and on one occasion fought physically over which one of them their father loved most.

Zhen Cong and Merril Silverstein studied intergenerational assistance and its relation to the well-being of elders in a rural province of China that shows a marked preference for assistance from sons and their families. They reached an interesting conclusion. Elders' depressive symptoms were reduced when they received assistance from daughters-in-law, and increased when assistance came from sons, suggesting that the benefits from intergenerational support was conditional on culturally prescribed norms.²⁸ Culturally prescribed norms influencing the quality of and happiness in a relationship are also discussed by Catherine Charsley²⁹. Approaching her topic from husbands' point of view she found that relationship quality and happiness are affected by factors associated with migration and culturally conditioned expectations. Considering Cong and Silverstein's result alongside with Pimentel's results on the importance of parental approval of a marriage as a key factor in marriage quality, it would be tempting to associate these findings with one of the results on the research on Chinese-Hungarian relationships. Actions taken by daughters-in-law may have an important influence on the extended Chinese families' well-being and it may have a negative effect if they do not or cannot meet certain cultural expectations. Another culturally conditioned norm related to the behaviour of daughters-in-law (and also sons-in-law) is their willingness to send their very young children to stay with grandparents in China for longer time periods. Sending children is an important step in of the exchange process within the family where it consolidates grandparents' role and position. These considerations may give clues to the why bonds between Chinese men and Hungarian women are less persistent and why a lower success rate can be associated with them.

While talking to members of "relationships of the typical Chinese migrants" in Hungary, issues related to filial duties were frequently connected to Chinese migrants' culturally different notion of the family. The following excerpt from the conversation with Susan provides an extreme case yet highlights some of the central problems that may arise:

S: The way I see it, no matter how many foreign languages my husband speaks, certain concepts would simply have different meanings in any language we would use to communicate. So, when I say my family, and when he says my family, it is a different thing that appears in his mind. (...) My family refers to his parents first of all. And his ancestors. And in a way we are somehow also included in the extended family as appendices, but we are of no primary interest. A completely different idea of the family... Most of his energy and efforts go into showing his parents how good a son he is and into supporting his parents in a maximal way. Well, now I am going to give you an extreme example: one of the reasons why our marriage failed was that he never supported us in any way. He thought that since I earned relatively good money, he had no reason to support his children financially. So I was supposed to maintain them. And I [referring to Zhang] would accumulate all I earn and buy a house for my parents in China, and buy a restaurant for my cousin in China, and so forth.

N: Is a cousin a more important family tie?

S: Yes, in the sense that... actually, it isn't. Not from an emotional point of view. That is also a gesture for his parents. To demonstrate to them how good a person their son is, and not only personally to his parents, but also to their neighbours, their entire neighbourhood. He wants to help his parents increase their prestige, so when they talk to the other elderly people or play mah-jong with them they could tell that

²⁸ Cong / Silverstein 2008.

²⁹ Charsley, Katharine: Unhappy Husbands: Masculinity and Migration in Transnational Pakistani Marriages. In: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2005, pp. 85-105.

their son bought this and that, and helped the family this way and that way. Do you understand?³⁰”

It is quite clear, that different cultural notions of seemingly universal concepts, like family, would not – and does not – doom Chinese-Hungarian marriages to unresolvable conflict or failure. In this case we have Susan who lives a life of protest against his father’s racism and prejudices. At the same time, her conservative religious background makes her have a fatalistic vision of marriage: Zhang is her share of marriage in life and she has felt obliged to persist in her marriage much longer than other Hungarian women I talked to. On the other hand we have Zhang with his different cultural concepts, the austerity of his poor, working class background and a last, very important thing: a family history of lack of affection in intimate family ties. The combination of individual traits and more general cultural notions seem to be important ingredients in how the marriage and family history of Zhang and Susan’s bond have developed for nearly three decades.

Exploring causes of why the Chinese work extremely hard by Western standards, Stevan Harrell makes a point that sheds light on the connection between the notion of family and the notion of Chinese work ethics³¹. Harrell argues that socialization and material incentives alone cannot be held responsible for work-related practices in China. He concludes that the “Chinese have been socialized, after all, not just to work hard, but to work hard for the long-term benefit of the family”³².

During our conversation about their marriage that we may consider an extreme case Susan questioned Zhang’s ability to love, a trait that may have resulted from his austere and unhappy family environment. At the same time several of my interviewees commented upon the role of closeness, intimacy and affection in understanding and accepting cultural otherness through their partner, even in cases of failed relationships.

Transnational practices, language strategies, cosmopolitanism.

Although Chinese migrants to Hungary can be considered a schoolbook example of a transnational migrant population, the degree of transnationality in the sample in general was relatively low. The patterns of transnational practices of the Chinese-Hungarian couples and families encountered during this research can be related to several factors. Susan and Zhang’s case, again, offers a good example of how this has come about. Partners’ and offspring’s language acquisition is a key issue in theirs as well as in all the other cases, too. Lacking fluency in Chinese language and ways is an obstacle to reaching up to the norms of behaviour expected from close kin. Two of my informants pointed out that grandchildren with no knowledge of Chinese became sources of dissatisfaction and humiliation for their grandparents while visiting them in China.

Although fluent in several languages including an exotic foreign tongue, Susan never studied Chinese formally. She related that at one point when her father-in-law came to live in Hungary she understood quite a bit and could utter some words. When asked for her reasons for not learning she said that in the beginning she was too busy attending her family and later, when conflicts between her and Zhang became more intense, she lost interest in learning. According to Susan, Zhang never spoke Chinese to his children because in Hungary it was his intention to learn Hungarian, and during their stay in Austria he made serious efforts to learn German, goals he finally achieved. According to Susan, their children so far have had no interest in learning Chinese and do not identify with their Chinese heritage at all.

³⁰ Interview with Susan, p. 7.

³¹ Harrell, Stevan: Why do the Chinese work so hard? Reflections on an entrepreneurial ethic. In: *Modern China*, Vol.11. No.2, 1985, pp. 203-226.

³² *Ibid* p. 224.

Building a successful and prosperous transnational economy-based enterprise with locally settled Chinese family members and business partners overseas, Zhang fits the stereotypical transnational Chinese businessman. Yet his attempt to move his wife and children to China in 1999 failed. In Susan's account it was not hardships and illnesses nor the lack of comfort the family faced in Zhang's hometown that made the entire family return to Hungary in less than two weeks. Susan highlighted an incident that she thought gave Zhang an ultimate push to change his mind about their mobility decision. Witnessing a husband beating up his wife violently in the bathroom of a local bus station in China Zhang intervened verbally indicating to the man that his behaviour was inappropriate. The situation ended in a violent fight in which local men beat Zhang up. When he reappeared with torn clothes and a bleeding face he told Susan that he changed his mind and did not want to move to China with his family after all.

Transnational practices of the other couples in the sample vary according to what relationship category they belong to. "Student love" bonds show two different patterns. The "student love" subgroup composed of highly educated, internationally mobile independent professionals who do not live in Hungary on a permanent basis and have a very high value on the international job market, often use a third language, mostly English, to communicate with their partner while their children become bi- or trilingual. These couples lead a cosmopolitan way of life on which the partners' cultural background does not exert a very tight grip. Other first generation "student love" members in the sample mutually learned to speak their partner's mother tongue, and several of the Hungarian partners had trained to become Chinese language professionals. "Student love" couples' children living in Hungary learn Chinese as one of the languages used at home by their mixed family. "Student love" couples' family economies in the sample are not defined transnationally. They cannot afford to travel to China to visit relatives every year. Children from the "typical Chinese migrants' relationships" with Hungarians – from the least successful group with relatively more cases of conflict and separation - generally know no Chinese at all. This might be connected to several factors: their Hungarian parent's lack of knowledge of Chinese, their parents' general level of education, the deterioration of the relationship between the partners, divorce or separation.

Searching for an explanation why there are few inter-ethnic partnerships between Chinese migrant entrepreneurs and Hungarians in Hungary, and even less such bonds that operate smoothly, we need to see how notions of family and marriage interfere with the operation of migrant entrepreneurs' transnational network-based business model. Why is it much more of a challenge for a Chinese entrepreneur to have a Hungarian partner? This transnational business model has Chinese bridgeheads, often close kin, at all stations of the trading process. According to data in the Hungarian trade registry Hungarian spouses do assist their Chinese partners in establishing the Hungarian bridgehead of their transnational business, nevertheless, they lack knowledge of Chinese and Chinese norms of behaviour towards close relatives and often have a more individualistic vision of intimate relationships. Hungarian spouses, mostly wives cannot and do not want to reach up to the expectations of their partners and their traditional families. The transnational family business-based career is in sharp contrast to the career of the independent professional driven by more individualistic preferences and considerations.

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