

## Chapter 3

# Fluid Childhoods: Chinese Migrants' Descendants Growing Up Transnationally

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### Abstract

In transnational families worldwide, different family members have varying degrees of mobility, as well as different physical and emotional experiences with relatives and places throughout their lives. For this reason, in recent decades, increasing attention has been placed upon the experiences of migrants' descendants growing up across borders.

Based on data from a multi-sited ethnography and a survey, this chapter explores the experiences of children growing up in Chinese transnational families split between Zhejiang province and their parents' immigration countries, located mainly in Europe. First, it introduces the migration context and methods, presenting the profiles and basic information of the 77 Chinese migrants' descendants who participated in a 'Roots-seeking Journey' summer camp held in their family area of origin in China, in 2018. Second, it explores their heterogeneous early childhood paths and conditions, paying particular attention to mobility, care strategies, inter-generational relations and transnational ties. Finally, this chapter introduces the concept of fluid childhoods, and reflects on the key role of care-related mobility and communication technologies in shaping their early life paths and experiences as well as further transnational engagement.

*Keywords:* Migration; Chinese families; migrants' descendants; fluid childhoods; mobility; care

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## Introduction: Migration Context

The Chinese diaspora is one of the largest globally. Historically, the largest flows had Southeast Asia as their main destination, where approximately 75% of Chinese people living outside of China remain today (Chee-Beng, 2013; Li & Li, 2013). However, in addition to the labour migration flows originating at the end of the nineteenth century – which had America, Australia and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe as their main destination – in the last few decades, migration flows have also expanded to Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as Africa (Chee-Beng, 2013; Li & Li, 2013).

Although nowadays Chinese migrants' socio-demographic profiles and areas of origin are increasingly heterogeneous, with big cities in China playing a key role, the *qiaoxiang* or hometowns/areas of international migration are the key reference points when discussing Chinese international migration. In particular, different localities in the Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, both located on the south-eastern coast of China, are important migration-sending areas. Traditionally, Zhejiangese/Fujianese migrants to Europe were primarily low-skilled rural migrants who were looking for economic opportunities within ethnic enclaves (Beltrán Antolín, 2003; Thunø & Li, 2020). It was after the Second World War, and particularly since China's Opening and Reform era (1978), that male-led temporary migration shifted to family-based migration and long-term settlement projects. These were linked to the development of an entrepreneurial project through entry into the catering sector and later on diversifying into trading and textile manufacturing (Beltrán Antolín, 2006; Thunø & Li, 2020).

Here we will focus on southern Zhejiang province, where the research presented in this chapter was conducted. Although it has started to diversify in the last few years, Qingtian county and the neighbouring city of Wenzhou are the main migration origin areas for Chinese people living in Spain, Italy and Portugal (Beltrán Antolín, 2003; Chang, 2012; Sáiz López, 2005, 2012), thereby becoming quantitatively important from the 1980s onward. In fact, in the last few decades, the influence of transnational links and social remittances has transformed Qingtian's physical, institutional and social landscape (Masdeu Torruella, 2014). To a lesser extent, people from Qingtian and Wenzhou are present in France, where most of the Chinese people who have settled in the country come from the Rui'an district, which is also in Zhejiang province (Guerassimoff, 2003). Additionally, until the mid-1990s, Wenzhou and the neighbouring city of Lishui – where Qingtian county is located – were the areas of origin for most irregular Chinese migration to Germany (Giese, 2003). In the last few decades, Chinese migration from these areas has also arrived in Eastern Europe. Wenxi village in the Wenzhou area has become a sending migration area to Hungary, where, like in Romania, the Zhejiangese are the second largest Chinese group in the country, after the Fujianese (Nyíri, 2003).

## Research Context and Methodology

The data presented in this chapter form part of a wider ethnography which explores the circulation of care within Chinese families located between Europe (mainly Spain) and Zhejiang province (Lamas-Abraira, 2021). The fieldwork was conducted

between 2016 and 2018, with a total of 12 months in China and 6 months in Spain. It draws on Baldassar and Merlas' notion of Care Circulation (2014) as both a conceptual framework and methodological tool. The Care Circulation framework incorporates the notion of family network – beyond the hegemonic notion of nuclear family – and it includes both those who migrate and those who stay behind. Similarly, it conceives of care as multidimensional (hands on, practical, emotional, financial and accommodating), and depending on the dimension it may be exchanged through proximate caring practices, proxy caring practices or at-a-distance care (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Overall, it aims to capture how care circulates among different family members, across distance and over time. In this chapter, the generational focus and the scope are different, comprising those migrants' descendants – from different countries – who participated in a 'Roots-seeking Journey' summer camp in southern Zhejiang province in 2018. However, the circulation of care remains as the conducting thread, using an inductive-iterative approach to data analysis (O'Reilly, 2012).

The 'Roots-seeking Journeys' (寻根之旅 *Xungen zhi li*), organized or sponsored by local governments and/or the Overseas Chinese Affairs Offices (OCAO), are summer camps targeted at Chinese migrants' descendants. These are focused on giving children who live abroad an idea of China and Chinese culture, incorporating activities such as Chinese calligraphy, Tai-Ji Quan and trips to tourist attractions, among many others. These types of camps are available in different cities and towns on the Lishui-Qingtian-Wenzhou axis. They are also common in other areas of Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, as well as in big cities in China. It is worth mentioning that, aside from this type of summer camps, the *qiaoxiang* receive a large influx of children and young people during summertime.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the 'Roots-seeking Journey' summer camp. I found information about three summer camps scheduled in the area through the internet, and I contacted them. One of them gave a positive response and welcomed me. To make sure of confidentiality and preserve the participants' privacy, the name of the locality and camp and its specific location will not be mentioned. During one day, I attended several programmed activities, and I had the opportunity to conduct participant observation, engage in informal talks with participants and the camp's staff and distribute a questionnaire. As the summer camp data protection policy prevented me from having access to the contacts of parents – most of whom remained out of China – informed consent was sought through summer camp administration officers. All of the children but two participated in the survey, which collected 77 responses.

The questionnaire was distributed in Chinese, using grammar and vocabulary that were as simple as possible to make sure that all of the participants could understand every question. In addition, four camp monitors, myself and an assistant that I hired for the occasion were available to resolve any queries that they had. The questionnaires consisted of 36 questions regarding their life paths, transnational experiences and ties as well as their family relationships and configuration (see Annex). These were completely anonymous and did not collect any personal data.

The participants included 38 females, 38 males and one participant who did not identify with this binary gender conception. They were aged between 10 and 19 years, with 80% of them aged between 12 and 16 years. In most cases, their parents were the first generation to migrate, but for eight of the respondents, their

grandparents were the first to move. In line with the history of migration flows to Europe, four of them had migrated to Germany, where an early settlement of Chinese migrants has been documented. Additional information on the countries of birth and residence will be provided in the following sections.

## Results

### *Heterogeneous Mobile Childhoods*

Among the 77 adolescents participating in the 2018 ‘Roots-seeking Journey’ summer camp, there were 12 different countries of birth, nine different countries of residence at the moment of the survey research and, additionally, two more countries where participants’ parents lived although they did not (see [Table 1](#)). Most of these were European countries and, surprisingly, France was not present. The country where the largest percentage of participants were born and lived was Spain, followed by Germany and Italy, which together represented more than 72% of the total. However, it is worth mentioning that the number of children born in these countries and the number of participants living in these countries at the moment of conducting the survey did not match. This means that some of them experienced international mobility during their childhoods. In the case of Spain, in addition to the 22 Chinese migrants’ descendants born there, three moved from China to Spain and two moved from Italy to Spain during their childhood. But additionally, one moved from Spain to Germany, where 19 Chinese migrants’ descendants were born and 20 lived. In the case of Italy, although 15 participants were born there and 15 participants lived there, as just mentioned, two of them moved from Italy to Spain during their childhood and one moved from China and Portugal, respectively, to Italy. That is why six participants were born in Portugal, but only five lived there.

It is also worth noting that seven children were born in China and five of them moved to another country, but at the moment of the survey, six participants lived in China. Of those, two were born in Serbia, one in Luxembourg and one in the United States, and they moved to China during their childhood. Two more did not live abroad, but their parents lived in Romania and Equatorial Guinea, respectively. Additionally, other countries of birth and residence are present in the sample, such as Greece, Brazil, Hungary and Ukraine.

Summing up the information in [Table 1](#), from a mobility perspective, we can conclude that transnational mobility during their childhoods was quite widespread. At the moment of conducting the survey, 13 out of 77 participants lived in a different country to that where they were born. Furthermore, seven of them experienced internal migration within their country of residence, changing the city/town where they lived. In this sense, it is worth remembering that it is common for different members within an extended family to be spread over different European countries and to move within them, seeking to maximize their economic opportunities and minimize their risks ([Beltrán Antolín, 2003](#); [Ceccagno, 2003](#)). Moreover, responses to the questionnaire indicate that 43 of the respondents spent part of their childhood – at least one year – in China.

Table 1. Countries of Birth and Residence and Incoming and Outgoing Flows.

Country	Live in	Birth	Incoming Flows (+)	Outgoing Flows (-)	Childhood in China
Spain	26	22	2 Italy to Spain 3 China to Spain	1 Spain to Germany	12
Germany	20	19	1 Spain to Germany	–	5
Italy	15	15	1 Portugal to Italy 1 China to Italy	2 Italy to Spain	11
China	6	7	1 Luxembourg to China 2 Serbia to China 1 USA to China	3 China to Spain 1 China to Italy 1 China to Brazil	11 <sup>a</sup>
Portugal	5	6	–	1 Portugal to Italy	2
Serbia	0	2	–	2 Serbia to China	–
Greece	1	1	–	–	1
Luxembourg	0	1	–	1 Luxem. to China	–
Brazil	2	1	–	1 China to Brazil	1
Hungary	1	1	–	–	0
USA	0	1	–	1 USA to China	–
Ukraine	1	1	–	–	0
Total	77	77			43

<sup>a</sup>Two of them were born in China and remain there nowadays.

This means that in addition to the seven people born in China, 36 more were born abroad and then sent to China to be partially raised there, as will be further detailed below. Finally, [Table 1](#) also shows how new migration flows are arriving in Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, Africa.

From a family-care perspective, we can translate the information contained in [Table 1](#) into the adoption of different transnational care strategies (see [Table 2](#)). As mentioned earlier, the history of Chinese migration to Europe and their

Table 2. Care Sequences, Strategies and Main Caregivers.

Care strategy	Care sequence <sup>a</sup> and main caregivers <sup>b</sup>			Number of people (77)																								
	Caregiver China	Mobility	Caregiver abroad	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
<b>Satellite babies (36)</b> Born Abroad → Sent to China	Mother	Move abroad →	Parents	1																								
	Grandparents		Parents																								24	
	Grandparents		Grandparents			3																						
	Grandparents		Nanny			3																						
	Nanny		Nanny		1																							
	Grandparents	Still in China				4																						
<b>Left behind (7)</b> born in China and partially raised there	Mother	Move abroad →	Parents	1																								
	Grandparents		Grandparents			3																						
	Nanny		Nanny		1																							
	Grandparents	Still in China			2																							
<b>Born and raised up abroad</b> (migration country) (34)			Parents																							16		
			Grandparents																							14		
			Nanny			4																						

<sup>a</sup>On some occasions the respondents indicated several main caregivers. Reflecting all combinations possible in the Table isn't operational. Therefore, only one category per case has been reflected, using the three more habitual (parents/grandparents/nanny). Furthermore, the prioritisation of one or another when overlapping is based on their relevance on broader ethnography data: (1) Nanny => (2) grandparents=> (3) parents. Therefore, if the category 'nanny' was chosen in the questionnaire, then it will always appear in the table, but there may be cases where both parents and nanny appear as caregivers. This implies some limitations, as the table (and the survey itself) doesn't capture further temporal dimension beyond those directly linked to transnational movements.

<sup>b</sup>Cohabitation with different members of the extended family is habitual in China. When grandparents are marked as the main caregivers, there are also three cases where great-grandparents and in seven cases aunts/uncles appear to share this role.

long-term settlement is intimately linked to their entrepreneurial activity, with an initial entry into the catering sector and further diversification (Beltrán Antolín, 2006; Thunø & Li, 2020). In line with this information, the responses reveal that approximately 50% of respondents' parents were shop owners and 20% of them were restaurant owners, while only 13% worked as staff in one of these businesses. In addition, approximately 10% of them ran a business and 7% worked as waged workers<sup>1</sup> in other sectors, although specific sectors have not been documented. Running their own business involves intensive workloads and often Chinese migrant couples must choose between contracting or transnationalizing childcare, as they cannot reconcile productive and reproductive demands (Sáiz López, 2012). It is within this context that transnational care practices become meaningful.

Following the categories used in the literature on migration (that will be further explained), we can say that seven of the participants within the sample were left-behind children and 36 were sent-back children (32 already reunited with their families, and four who remain in China). Most of them were sent as satellite babies.

The 'left-behind' concept refers to children born in the family's homeland who stay there while their parents migrate. Within the sample, only two of them remained in China at the time of conducting the survey, while their parents lived in Romania and Equatorial Guinea, respectively. The parents of one migrated over 10 years ago, and the parents of the other between five and 10 years ago. In both cases, they remain in China at an age of 12 or more, contradicting the traditional patterns of early family reunification. Similarly, within the broader fieldwork, an emerging trend of adolescent migrants' descendants staying in China was documented, although these are still a minority. However, it is worth mentioning that these minors' narratives challenge the 'left-behind' discourse<sup>2</sup>, as they do not aim to join their families abroad and highly value their socially and economically privileged status in the local context as a result of their parents' migration (Lamas-Abraira, 2021).

The term 'sent-back children' refers to those children who, despite being born in their parents' migration destination country, are sent to their family's homeland, where they are cared for by extended family members, while their parents remain working abroad. Consistent with patterns seen in other Chinese transnational families worldwide, most of them were sent as satellite babies<sup>3</sup>: babies born into Chinese migrant families, who at a very young age are sent to China to be partially raised there (Bohr & Tse, 2009; Bohr & Whitfield, 2011; Wong, 2015),

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<sup>1</sup>Most of these being males working in Italy.

<sup>2</sup>This discourse is imbued with negative connotations, as it tends to focus on – and generalizes – the undesirable consequences of the children's physical and emotional conditions, presenting the children in these circumstances as quasi-abandoned, without further questioning the circumstances and context.

<sup>3</sup>Although the year of arrival to China is not reflected in the questionnaire, the satellite babies' practices was a theme prompted during the fieldwork. In most cases, they were being sent aged 2 years old or less.

and some years later move back to live with their parents. Within the sample, they spent an average of 5.2 years in China, generally being reunited with their parents when below 12 years of age.

In line with the motives expressed by migrant families worldwide for deploying sent-back strategies, this emerging trend may respond to the desire of families to enable their children to make a connection with their homeland (Soto, 1989), or to provide them with transnational discipline or care (Foner, 2009; Orellana et al., 2001). The homeland is perceived as a safer, stricter and disciplined context (Soto, 1989; Thorne et al., 2001). But often these practices are linked to the social and economic context and conditions (Orellana et al., 2001), particularly the difficulties experienced by parents in the migration destination country in coping with work in the labour market and childcare (Bohr & Tse, 2009; Inglis & Manderson, 1984; Lamas-Abraira, 2021).

Finally, it is worth understanding some of these practices in their own context, and accounting for the strategies that seek to maximize the children's future opportunities and current resources, such as giving birth in the United States (Wang, 2017) where birth right citizenship exists. This may be the case for one of the respondents, who was born in the United States and was then sent to China, living there until the moment of conducting the survey. Similar cases have been documented beyond the survey, within the broader ethnography (Lamas-Abraira, 2021). In contrast, in countries such as Spain, nationality is determined by the *nationality* of one or both parents. Therefore, reuniting the minor with their family in Spain at an early age is advisable to make sure of their rights in the future. In this sense, the circulation of care (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) cannot be isolated from its context. As Kilkey and Merla (2014) emphasize through the concept of 'situated transnationalism', institutional contexts affect the capability of the different members of transnational families to participate in the circulation of care.

Regarding care arrangements while living in China during their childhood – either as left-behind or sent-back children – the respondents cohabitated with different extended family members and, much less often (two cases), also with the mother. The maternal and paternal grandmothers were the most common caregivers, with a very slight prevalence of the former. Cohabitation with aunts and uncles was also common and, less frequently, with cousins. Note that three participants also reported having been cared for by the great-grandparents, highlighting the older family generations' active role in family care (Lamas-Abraira, 2019). In only two cases did the family hire a child caregiver.

Beyond sending children to China, the survey revealed another type of transnational childcare strategy through which extended family members experienced care-related mobility. For 17 out of the 77 of the respondents, both grandparents or one of them – generally the grandmother – were the main caregivers in the parents' immigration country, which implies care-related mobility. However, the questionnaire did not document the length of the stay. Cases of transnational grandparenting have been documented in transnational families worldwide, often constrained by institutional contexts (Kilkey & Merla, 2014). However, beyond institutional constraints, Chinese grandparents appear to



be particularly ‘flexible, mobile caregivers’ (Zhou, 2013, p. 292). In addition, the other three informants were cared for by the grandparents, who already lived abroad – although not necessarily in the same city – as they were the first generation to migrate. Less frequently (in three cases), other extended family members (such as aunts or uncles) also shared the caregiving role.

Nine of the respondents were also cared for by a hired caregiver in the parents’ immigration country, and two of them also in China. Therefore, the childcare was subcontracted, entailing proxy caring practices. In three of the families, they opted for a non-Chinese caregiver, and the other six hired an ethnically Chinese caregiver. Although the reasons for choosing one or another were not considered in the survey, ethnicity is an essential factor when choosing a caregiver in migrant families (Song & Parker, 1997b; Sourolová, 2015). Within the broader research on which this study is framed, the results suggest that whether there is a shortage of Chinese caregivers (in small towns) or a short/long migration history in the country (emphasizing destination country socialization or Chinese socialization, respectively) are key factors in choosing either a Chinese or a non-Chinese caregiver.

In summary, this survey confirms that different care strategies may be adopted by Chinese transnational families at different times. And that this is done in such a way that using a family childcare strategy during early childhood (e.g. grandparenting in China) did not prevent families from using another one later on (e.g. hiring a caregiver in Spain). For example, one respondent was born in Spain, then sent to China where she was cared for by her maternal grandparents, and once back in Spain she was cared for by a Chinese nanny, which implies proxy caring practices. Another example is a girl also born in Spain who was sent to China where she lived with both her maternal and paternal grandparents. When she moved back to Spain, her maternal grandmother also did, which implies care-related mobility. Therefore, strategies within the family network and beyond may overlap or occur sequentially, which implies different and flexible care sequences (Radziwinowiczówna et al., 2020). Finally, 34 out of the 77 children were born and raised in their parents’ immigration countries. 14 of them had their grandparents as their main caregivers, 4 of them had a nanny and for the 16 remaining, their parents retained the main caregiver role. In turn, for the latter they did not use any long-term alternative care strategies. However, as will be addressed in the next section, summertime stays also imply transnational mobility and cohabitation with extended family.

## Transnational Ties, Experiences and Preferences

To visit China in the summer of 2018, some travelled there with their mothers. This happened for 23 out of the 77 respondents. Less often, the fathers also accompanied them, as was the case for 13 adolescents. Within this practice, it is common for them to cohabit with their siblings and members of the extended family. With a couple of exceptions, all of them cohabited with at least one member of the grandparents’ generation during that summer. The presence of

both maternal and paternal grandparents was balanced. Moreover, 10 participants also cohabited with their cousins, and, in one case, the adolescent also shared the living space with her Spanish caregiver, who travelled with the family to China. Although hiring Spanish caregivers in Chinese families in Spain is not unusual, travelling together to China is an exceptional case. After raising her hand while filling out the questionnaire that I had distributed to the participants in the summer camp, this person told me that she did not know which option she should tick, as none of the available options reflected her situation. That was when she explained to me that, despite the fact that her mother and her father were 100% ethnically Chinese, one of her grandmothers – who was her caregiver during her childhood – was Spanish. Therefore, although care was initially sub-contracted to someone outside of the family, the care relationship and relatedness<sup>4</sup> (Carsten, 2000) led to a process of ‘kinning’<sup>5</sup> (Howell, 2006) between them.

Regarding at-a-distance communication with their parents, when they did not travel with the participants, it was mainly reported to take place with the mother on a daily basis, or at least several times per week. With fathers, the frequency of communication was more irregular: in most cases they were in contact several times per week (39%), followed by daily communication (32%), once per week (15%) and every two weeks (8%) or less. Therefore, in this case the transnational context did not serve to rework gendered roles linked to care and intimacy (Kang, 2012). The most common means of communication was sending WeChat messages – the most popular app in China – followed by video calls and voice calls.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the gendered pattern of transnational communication was consistent with their assessment of the relationship with their mothers and fathers. Most of the respondents rated their relationship with their mothers as good or very good, while the quality of relationship with the fathers was reported to be less good, although only 5% reported having a bad or very bad relationship. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that three people thought that their fathers did not care about them. Yet that was not related to mothers, who were also perceived as being more affectionate and understanding than fathers. However, both fathers and mothers were described as strict and controlling.

Study participants reported a high degree of interaction across borders not only with their families but also with their friends. Although not contemplated in

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<sup>4</sup>Carsten (2000) understands kinship as context-specific moving ‘away from the pre-given analytic opposition between the biological and the social on which much anthropological study of kinship has rested’ (p. 4), by emphasizing the small, everyday actions that create ties among people.

<sup>5</sup>Howell (2006) defines ‘kinning’ as ‘the process by which a foetus or new-born child is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people, and the connection is expressed in a conventional kin idiom’ (2006, p. 8), emphasizing the importance of social ties and de-emphasizing biological ones.

<sup>6</sup>In all cases, they spoke in Chinese with their parents (only in two cases did they also speak in the official language of the country where they lived), with Mandarin prevailing over any dialect. Among siblings, 54% of them spoke in the official language of the country where they lived.

the questionnaire, this was a theme that emerged during the summer camp activities and broader fieldwork. This co-presence at-a-distance enables continuity in their relationships. Back in the countries where they lived, keeping-in-touch with the friends that they met in the summer camp at-a-distance was not likely to be a problem either, as they created different WeChat groups while there to exchange pictures and confidences. In fact, some of the participants in the 2018 summer camp were connected to other people that they had met in previous summer experiences, meeting again on their trips to China. 85% of the respondents also reported to want to go back to China the next summer. Meeting other adolescents living in the same country may serve to expand their own proximate network there, where a significant percentage<sup>7</sup> of their friends are actually reported to be Chinese migrants' descendants. However, through this type of summer camp experience and further keeping-in-touch, their transnational networks beyond China and the country where they live may expand too, thereby taking in third countries. This further keeping-in-touch is enabled through direct communication or through posts on WeChat and other social networks, such as Instagram, which allow for ambient co-presence or peripheral awareness of their lives (Madianou, 2016). In doing so, they create their own links with their family's hometown and beyond, entailing a different but interconnected experience to that of the migrant generation (Levitt, 2009; Levitt & Waters, 2002).

That summer of 2018 was the first time travelling to China for only seven of the respondents. Six of them had travelled twice, and 64 of them had travelled three or more times. This information reveals a high degree of transnational mobility for the participants. In line with findings in other contexts, trips are deemed to be essential for developing migrants' descendants' own connections in their family's home country (Gardner & Mand, 2012; Haikkola, 2011). When asked which country they wanted to live in during their next life stage, most of them (70%) wanted to study and/or to work in the country they lived in or, less frequently, in a third country, such as Australia, Canada, United States, Japan or South Korea. Similarly, most of them (all but 21) wanted to continue their adult lives outside of China. Among the 21 who wanted to live in China, this included five out of the six who lived in China at the time of the survey, while the sixth preferred to go back to Luxembourg where he was born. Of the remaining 16, only three – two females and one male – had not lived in China before, as they had always lived in Germany and Ukraine, respectively. However, two of them had spent three or more summers in China, and only for one of them the summer of 2018 was their first experience in China. Therefore, albeit not with exceptions, responses to the questionnaires revealed that the minors who lived in China during their childhood or that have visited China frequently are more likely to want to live in China in the future.

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<sup>7</sup>For 30% of respondents to the questionnaire, most of their friends were Chinese migrants' descendants, for 28% some of them were and for 38% a small proportion of them were.

## Concluding Remarks

Transnational families are often seen as ‘here and there, multiply routed between and rooted in the fabric of two or more social fields’ (Huang et al., 2008, p. 7). Living in a transnational social field implies sustaining social relations across borders in which migrants, the people who remain in the origin country and those who are born in the immigration country (migrants’ descendants) all take part (Glick Schiller & Fouron, 1999), albeit to different and changing degrees. In this chapter, we have seen how mobility is embedded in the life paths of Zhejiangnese transnational families and migrants’ descendants, with suitcases having constituted a familiar element since early childhood. Beyond the initial migratory movement, transnational mobility is crucial for enabling the care circulation (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) in these families, and it involves different family members and family generations. In particular, the caregiving role of the grandparents’ generation – either in China or abroad – is essential in lessening the expenditure of social reproduction. Furthermore, gender is explanatory when talking about care circulation, with mothers, grandmothers and nannies having a key role as hands-on caregivers, and also as at-a-distance caregivers, with mothers channelling communication with children across borders.

Moreover, mobility and flexibility are key concepts in understanding both the care circulation (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) in Zhejiangnese transnational families and these migrants’ descendants’ childhoods. The latter depends on the former. In addition, I posit that the childhoods of these migrants’ descendants who grow up transnationally are fluid. Fluid is defined as a substance that flows easily, or the situations, ideas or plans which are ‘not fixed and are likely to change, often repeatedly and unexpectedly’ but which may be also ‘smooth and continuous’.<sup>8</sup> Fluidity in these Zhejiangnese migrants’ descendants’ childhoods is made up of flexibility and mobility. This fluidity is articulated through multiple dimensions.

First, spatially: By engaging transnational mobility from a very early life stage, their childhoods challenge the hegemonic notion of childhood linked to statism and stability (Fass, 2005). Moving across space also entails moving along time and altering relations with people. This shapes their paces of life (Amit & Salazar, 2020), which simultaneously are highly dependent on changing available resources (including social capital) and care needs.

Second, socially: when considering the pool of caregivers, their childhoods are also fluid. Indeed, they are particularly fluid in contrast with most – albeit not all – countries where they live, where a Global-North tailored normative nuclear family model prevails. Therefore, parents, and most specifically mothers, are deemed to be the children’s co-present caregivers, favouring the bourgeois ideal (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). In this line, still prevalent multigenerational arrangements in China are beginning to be perceived as increasingly undesirable, with government and mass media promoting hegemonic childhood ideals (Binah-Pollak, 2014). However, based on the data presented in this chapter, it is

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<sup>8</sup>Definition of Fluid. Cambridge online dictionary [accessed 11/11/2022]. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fluid>.

important to recover here the notions of family network and care as a multidimensional resource that may be exchanged through proximate caring practices, proxy caring practices or at-a-distance care (Baldassar & Merla, 2014), thereby enabling this fluidity in childcare arrangements. In doing so, it incorporates not only a broad range of caregivers in China (such as great-grandparents or aunts) but also ‘flexible, mobile caregivers’ (Zhou, 2013, p. 292) such as the family (flying) grandparents. As the fieldwork shows, through relatedness (Carsten, 2000) even non-blood related Spanish caregivers may be incorporated into the migrants’ descendant’s family (as a third grandmother).

Third, and finally, is the transnational engagement dimension: New media and modes to relate at-a-distance (Madianou, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2012) appear to be essential in enabling a fluid interconnected social experience across countries, for example, by enabling daily contact with their mothers and friends while in China. In addition, beyond this dual frame, flowing to third countries and enabling the sustaining of the relations initiated in the summer camps, either through direct interaction (messages, calls, etc.) or through ambient co-presence or peripheral awareness about their lives (Madianou, 2016).

In summary, this chapter unveils the fluid nature of the childhoods of Zhejiangese migrants’ descendants, underlining the key role of flexibility and mobility in those – both physical and virtual. However, although the research data have revealed this fluid condition, due to length restrictions, the role of children’s agency as well as that of structural and material constraints and cultural patterns in shaping the flows couldn’t be addressed in depth in this chapter. This further consideration had been explored elsewhere (Lamas-Abraira, 2021) in a method wherein the minor’s agency is vindicated, thereby going beyond the children as objects approach (Dobson, 2009).

## Notes

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## Appendix: Questionnaire (English Translation)

Sex: Female ..... Male .....

Year of birth: .....

Family size (no of members): .....

1. Place of birth: .....
2. Place of residence: .....
3. Who do you live with? (Mark all that apply)
4. Did you live in China during your childhood?
  - Yes ..... how many years? .....
  - No

<input type="checkbox"/> Father	<input type="checkbox"/> Father
<input type="checkbox"/> Mother	<input type="checkbox"/> Mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Older brother	<input type="checkbox"/> Older brother
<input type="checkbox"/> Younger brother	<input type="checkbox"/> Younger brother
<input type="checkbox"/> Older sister	<input type="checkbox"/> Older sister
<input type="checkbox"/> Younger sister	<input type="checkbox"/> Younger sister
<input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandfather
<input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandmother
<input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandfather
<input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandmother



5. Who was your main caregiver during your childhood? (Mark all that

<b>Family Member</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>Abroad</b>
Father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older brother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Older sister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal great grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal great grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal great grandmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal great grandfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal uncle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal aunt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal uncle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal aunt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cousins	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Foreign hired caregiver	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chinese hired caregiver	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

apply)

6. Nowadays (summertime) in China, who do you live with?

7. How many times have you visited China in summertime?

- This is my first time
- Two times
- Three or more times

8. Would you like to come back to China next summer?

- Yes
- No

9. Would you like to live in China?

- Yes
- No

10. In your family, who was the first to migrate?

- Parents' generation
  - Grandparents' generation
11. Do you have siblings living in China?

- Yes
- No

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Father               | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal uncle             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mother               | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal aunt              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Older brother        | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal uncle             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Younger brother      | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal aunt              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Older sister         | <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal great grandfather |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Younger sister       | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal great grandmother |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandfather | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal great grandfather |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paternal grandmother | <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal great grandmother |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandfather | <input type="checkbox"/> Cousins                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maternal grandmother | <input type="checkbox"/> Hired caregiver            |

12. In which country live your parents? .....
13. How many years have they lived abroad?
14. How many siblings do you have?

Older brothers:  
Older sisters:

Father:  
Mother:  
Older brother: ....

Older sister: ....  
Younger brother: ...  
Younger sister:

Younger brothers:

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Primary school	<input type="checkbox"/> Primary school
<input type="checkbox"/> Middle school	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle school
<input type="checkbox"/> High school	<input type="checkbox"/> High school
<input type="checkbox"/> University	<input type="checkbox"/> University

Younger sisters:

Father	Mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant owner	<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant owner
<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant worker	<input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant worker
<input type="checkbox"/> Store owner	<input type="checkbox"/> Store owner
<input type="checkbox"/> Store worker	<input type="checkbox"/> Store worker
<input type="checkbox"/> Import/export business owner	<input type="checkbox"/> Import/export business owner
<input type="checkbox"/> Other business (owner)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other business (owner)
<input type="checkbox"/> Another sector (worker)	<input type="checkbox"/> Another sector (worker)

15/16. Which is the education level of parents?

Father	Mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily
<input type="checkbox"/> Several times a week	<input type="checkbox"/> Several times a week
<input type="checkbox"/> Once per week	<input type="checkbox"/> Once per week
<input type="checkbox"/> Every two weeks	<input type="checkbox"/> Every two weeks
<input type="checkbox"/> More than two weeks	<input type="checkbox"/> More than two weeks

17. Parents' work

Father	Mother
<input type="checkbox"/> Voice call	<input type="checkbox"/> Voice call
<input type="checkbox"/> Video call	<input type="checkbox"/> Video call
<input type="checkbox"/> Send WeChat message	<input type="checkbox"/> Send WeChat message
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: .....	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: .....

18. During summertime in China, how often do you talk with your parents?

Frequency	Means
<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Voice call
<input type="checkbox"/> Several times a week	<input type="checkbox"/> Video call
<input type="checkbox"/> Once per week	<input type="checkbox"/> Send WeChat message
<input type="checkbox"/> Every two weeks	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: .....
<input type="checkbox"/> More than two weeks	

17. How do you communicate with your parents? (Mark all that apply)  
 19. How often do you talk to your siblings? How do you communicate?  
 20. Normally, with your siblings you speak in... (mark all that apply)

- Mandarin
- Chinese dialect
- Language of the country of residence

---

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin	<input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese dialect	<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese dialect
<input type="checkbox"/> Language of the residence country	<input type="checkbox"/> Language of the residence country
<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

---

- Other

---

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Native	<input type="checkbox"/> Native
<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good
<input type="checkbox"/> Basic	<input type="checkbox"/> Basic
<input type="checkbox"/> Bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Bad
<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad

---

- 21/23. Normally, with your parents you speak in... (mark all that apply)

---

<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Very good	<input type="checkbox"/> Very good
<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good
<input type="checkbox"/> Normal	<input type="checkbox"/> Normal
<input type="checkbox"/> Bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Bad
<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad	<input type="checkbox"/> Very bad

---

- 24/25. Language skills of your parents in the language of immigration country:

26. How would you rate your relationship with your parents?  
 27. Do you have extra escolar classes?

Yes: .....

	<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
Affectionate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understanding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strict	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Old thinking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Open minded/modern	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Controlling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't care about me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

No

<b>Sentence</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
He/she is always busy at work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she give me less freedom than that of my friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she is very strict with me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she do not care about me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she value me a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
He/she is very different to me because they grow up in China	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

28. How will you define your parents?

29. Do you agree with these sentences? (Mark if yes)

30. Do you suffer racist attitudes in the country you live in?

- Daily
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not often
- Never

31. If you live out of China, are your friends Chinese?

- Most of them
- Some of them
- Few of them
- None

32. When you come to China, your friends are overseas Chinese?

- Most of them
- Some of them

Few of them

Weekly Day	Weekend
<input type="checkbox"/> Tide up my room	<input type="checkbox"/> Tide up my room
<input type="checkbox"/> Wash my clothes	<input type="checkbox"/> Wash my clothes
<input type="checkbox"/> Preparing dishes	<input type="checkbox"/> Preparing dishes
<input type="checkbox"/> Dishwashing	<input type="checkbox"/> Dishwashing
<input type="checkbox"/> Help at family business	<input type="checkbox"/> Help at family business
<input type="checkbox"/> Care elderly	<input type="checkbox"/> Care elderly
<input type="checkbox"/> Care siblings	<input type="checkbox"/> Care siblings

None

33. In a normal day in the country you live, what do you do?

34. Do you want to do when in the next years? (Mark all that apply)

Study in China

Study in the country I live

Study abroad: .....

Work in China (family business)

Work in China (non-family business)

Work in the country I live (family business)

Work in the country I live (family business)

Work anywhere else abroad

35. What would you like as a profession? .....

36. Where will you like to live as an adult?