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# Transnational marriages in Yiwu, China: tensions over money

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**Abstract** *In this article, I explore the role of transnational marriages in the activities and strategies of trading networks, through the lens of money and uncertainty in marriage. I argue that uncertainty in spousal relations challenges the durability of such unions and hence the effectiveness of their role in trading activities. These uncertainties are shaped by intertwined factors, including especially the embedded relationship between commercial and social networks (for example, business partners, kinship, friendship) and spousal relations, the differing cultural values and practices of the partners to such unions, stereotypes, varying forms and degrees of trust and mistrust, and the dynamics of global markets and state policy. Uncertainties driven by these factors exacerbate mistrust in both marriages and trading relations; they also shape shifting orientations toward future life. Therefore, I argue that the role of marriage in trading activities should be neither simplified nor romanticized.*

**Keywords** MISTRUST, MONEY, SOCIAL NETWORKS, TRADE, TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE, TRUST, UNCERTAINTY

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After more than three decades of the open-door policy, transnational marriages between Chinese and foreigners have become common in contemporary China. The focus of most of the existing literature on transnational marriages is on Chinese women marrying men from Western or advanced Asian economies such as Taiwan, South Korea or Japan, and then relocating to their husband's country (Constable 2005; Oxfeld 2005). With the growth of the Chinese economy in recent decades, however, scholars have observed that increasing numbers of foreign spouses are moving to China to reside with their wives (Farrer 2008; Lan 2015). This is particularly salient in trading nodes such as Guangzhou and Yiwu – the latter being an officially designated international trading city in Zhejiang Province. In such settings, especially since 2000 and the boom in trade between China and countries in Africa, South Asia and the Middle East, thousands of mostly male traders have come to China and many of them marry Chinese women and establish families in these cities (Lan 2015; Ma

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2012; Methews et al. 2017; Zhou 2017). In this article, I focus on transnational marriages in Yiwu between Chinese women and Muslim traders from Arab countries, South Asia and Africa. Although a lot has been written about foreign Muslim traders in Yiwu who form the largest foreign community in the city, their marriages and relationships with the Chinese are still under-researched.

On my first visit to Yiwu in 2016, I found that local people were often critical of transnational marriages. Many suspected that foreign traders only married Chinese women to obtain visas and facilitate business. They cited cases of failed marriages, particularly of foreign traders abandoning their Chinese wives after their business in China failed. They suggested that these marital breakdowns showed that transnational marriages in Yiwu were primarily motivated by business considerations. More strikingly, on my second visit to Yiwu in 2017, a Pakistani man who had married a Chinese woman told me that he believed that 70 per cent of traders married merely to facilitate their business activities. When I jokingly asked him if he had married for the same reason, he laughed and said that his marriage was based on true love: he and his wife had met in Beijing when he was still a student there, but then so too had many of the other traders who also initially came to China as students.

Rather than focusing simply on the motives of those who engage in transnational marriages in Yiwu, in this article I explore the role of transnational marriages in the activities and strategies of trading networks more broadly. The hidden logic in the above discourse is that marrying a Chinese woman will increase a foreigner's success in trade. Is that true? My data suggest a more nuanced picture. Uncertainty in a spousal relationship will challenge the durability of the union and, hence, the effectiveness of its role in trading activities. A range of intertwined factors shape these uncertainties, especially the embeddedness of the link between commercial and social networks (business partners, kin, friendship groups) and the spousal relationship, the different cultural values and practices of the partners to such unions, stereotypes, varying forms and degrees of trust and mistrust, and the dynamics of global markets and state policy. Uncertainties driven by these factors exacerbate mistrust in both a marriage and trading relations; they also shape shifting orientations towards future life. I argue that the role of marriage in trading activities should be neither simplified nor romanticized.

Historically, cross-cultural marriages have played important roles in building trading networks, mediating cultural exchanges, spreading religion (Bulliet et al. 2018: 384; Falola and Usman 2009: 272; Kayadibi 2011: 6; Lapidus 2014: 432; Sen 2009: 158), and colonial expansion (Ipsen 2015; Lansing 2000). Because of the paucity of archival material, the historical literature offers limited insights into the lived experiences of cross-cultural family life in trading networks (Ipsen 2015: 12; Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015: 147). More recent anthropological works, however, explore present-day transnational marriages and intimacies in trading contexts. Consistent with the historical pattern, these researchers point to the active role of such unions in the dynamics of trade networks: they stress the importance of resource exchange within intimate relations and point to mutual benefits based on couples' cultural, economic and social resources (Farrer 2008; Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015). Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado (2015), for instance, note that intimate relationships between Afghan

men and ‘local women’ play a vital role in the spatial anchoring and commercial fortunes of transnational Afghan traders in Ukraine. ‘Such relationships play a variety of roles across the domains of care and well-being, education and upbringing, and commerce and trade’ (Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015: 161). The ways in which such intimate unions operate, however, in anchoring trading activities and the extent to which they facilitate trading networks more generally remain under-researched.

In this article, I question the taken-for-granted role of transnational marriage in building trading networks by interrogating the stability of such unions through analysing tensions within such marriages in Yiwu. Research on marriages between Chinese women and African traders in the Chinese trading node of Guangzhou has shed light on the precarity of married life. Due mainly to border controls and institutional barriers, such couples are either forced to move to the husband’s country or to experience long separations (Castillo 2016; Lan 2015; Zhou 2017). Tensions resulting from cultural and religious differences and stereotypes are also common among such couples (Methews et al. 2017; Zhou 2017). While these authors focus on the legal and cultural issues affecting transnational family strategies, in this article I approach uncertainties in marriage from another angle – that of tensions over money. More specifically, I discuss the nature of such tensions as they are expressed while cooperating in family businesses and in the distribution of family income. In so doing, I show the impact on the stability of spousal relationships of mixing business and marriage, which has implications for the role of marriage in trade.

By investigating the role of transnational marriage in trading networks, through this article I aim to contribute to the broader anthropological scholarship on the role of kinship or ethno-religious ties in trade, particularly in building relations of trust. Early writings on trade diasporas assert that trading communities often rely on kinship and family ties to facilitate trustworthy trading networks (Aslanian 2014). However, recent scholars, such as Marsden (2016b) and contributors to Caroline Humphrey’s (2018) edited volume, *Trust and mistrust in the economies of the China–Russia borderlands*, challenge such assumptions and argue that kinship categories or ethno-religious ties are insufficient for building trust. These scholars stress that mutual economic interests and individual negotiations are central to trust and cooperation. While my argument accords with that of the later scholars, my aim here is not to investigate the essential elements for building trust in trade, but to explain why the role of transnational marriage in building trading networks is limited. In this sense, Marsden’s (2016b: 112–13) emphasis on the ‘ambivalence of kinship relations’ is important. In addition, Aslanian’s (2014) network structure approach is helpful to my analysis because he emphasizes the importance of exploring trust and cooperation in the concrete contexts of particular social networks.

According to Aslanian’s network structure approach, ‘closure’ and ‘multiplex’ networks are the key factors in enabling trading partners to generate and maintain trust and cooperation, and thus reduce ‘transaction costs’. By ‘closure’, Aslanian means that a network is characterized by clearly defined borders and rules, within which common values and beliefs are shared and members can be easily monitored and punished for violating norms – the so-called ‘reputation effects’. ‘Multiplex’ relationships mean

that the network's members are connected through more than one role, position, or context. According to this network structural analysis, transnational marriages should lower 'transaction costs': the foreign customer trusts the foreign husband as each is part of the same closed network so can punish bad behaviour. The Chinese supplier trusts the Chinese wife for similar reasons. A foreign husband and his Chinese wife trust each other because of the multiplexity of their connection – they are bound in trade and marriage, so each has more to lose (emotional investment, relationship with children, access to business networks) if the relationship ruptures. A transnational marriage fuses otherwise disparate networks of customers and suppliers into a single value chain, thus lowering transaction costs and the verification costs associated with principal-agent relationships. While there is much theoretical coherence in this argument, it romanticizes the relationships of married couples and fails to recognize the need for trade networks 'to be understood in relation to business lifecycles and the changing financial circumstances of individuals' (Marsden 2016b: 112). The ethnographic data collected in Yiwu suggest that the fusing together of these networks places powerful stresses on such marriages. This is because foreign husbands and Chinese wives are each beholden to the competing interests of different sets of networks, each effectively being the agent for a set of principals with different interests. Moreover, because the two parties to the marriage are embedded in different social relations (kin groups and friendships), they are motivated to invest their resources and reputations in different and disconnected networks. While it is their role in the marriage to cultivate these separate networks to further their collective business activities, these networks can also provide alternative means of support if the marriage ruptures. Tensions over the distribution of resources and commitments to different social networks can create conflict and tension in conjugal relations, which, in turn, will affect the stability of such marriages and their role in trading networks.

Transnational marriages are thus neither solid nor monolithic entities performing agent functions. Borrowing from Burt's (2005) brokerage analysis, one can see transnational marriages as a node of brokerage connecting two sets of closed networks between which it would be valuable, but risky, to build ties of trust. However, transnational marriage units are an unusual kind of brokerage actor: brokers are normally single actors who reconcile the interests of two parties. By contrast, in this case, the brokerage unit itself is split into two. Each half of the unit holds different ideas and assumptions based on the individual cultural background of each party: stresses placed on the brokerage node can therefore find expression in cultural stereotypes of both the self and other. Informed as they are by conceptions of trust/mistrust, and calculations of self-interest, such stereotypes work against the stability of the marriage union. The irony is that the more successful the marriage in business terms (the more the principals entrust the agents) the more the agents are beholden to their otherwise disconnected bases, and the greater the tensions within the marriage.

After a brief introduction to transnational couples in Yiwu and their motives for getting married, I move on to examine the financial tensions that arise in cooperative business ventures. These can occur over income distribution, particularly the husband's expenditure on family and friends on the one hand, and the wife's socially

embedded consumerism on the other, for there is a clear association between excessive expenditure and mistrust in marriage. I conclude with a summary of my findings.

### **Transnational marriage between Chinese women and foreign Muslim traders in Yiwu**

Over the last three decades, Yiwu, once a small town in China's eastern coastal province of Zhejiang, has grown into the world's largest wholesale market for small commodities. It attracts many thousands of international traders, particularly from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The business opportunities that this trade creates have also attracted thousands of Chinese to live in the city. It is thus both a major 'site of interaction' for traders (Harper and Armrith 2012; Marsden 2018) and a new 'contact zone' of global capitalism (Farrer 2008), playing a key role in bottom-up globalization (Marsden 2016a: 3; Mathews et al. 2012). Due to its relatively relaxed attitude towards religion, Yiwu has become a popular destination for both foreign Muslim traders and Chinese Muslim migrants. As a result, it has come to be known as 'home to sizeable and diverse Muslim communities', where 'a distinctively "Islamic" flavour of life' (Marsden 2018: 124) is visible in parts of the city where Muslims live and socialize. In addition to the large mosque, a symbol of Islam's place in public life, in which Muslims from different cultural backgrounds meet for major gatherings, especially for Friday prayers and Islamic festivals, 'Maeda' (*yiguo fenqing jie*, meaning Foreign Street), is well-known in China and among traders throughout the world for its diverse Halal restaurants.

No official data are available on foreign Muslim traders in Yiwu.<sup>1</sup> According to official statistics, the registered foreign population is 14,000 and most of these are Arabs (Marsden 2018: 136). In 2013, there were 1,331,700 registered Chinese migrants (Li et al. 2016) and many of these were women working mainly in the market, but also in trade agencies, restaurants, hotels and shops; others are independent traders. This social environment facilitates intermarriage with foreign traders through daily interactions (Lan 2015: 134). During my fieldwork in Yiwu (2016–17), an estimated 300–400 Chinese women married to foreign Muslims were living in the city. I collected data on 26 Chinese women who had married foreign Muslim traders and 10 Muslim traders who had married Chinese women.<sup>2</sup> Three of these men were married to three of the 26 women who are included. Three out of these 33 couples have divorced, and one woman was already widowed; the rest are legally registered.

The Muslim husbands, of which there are 21, are mainly from Arab countries such as Jordan, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Iran and Iraq. Of the remainder, nine are from South Asia, two from sub-Saharan Africa and one from Turkey. All but three work in the informal business sector and have spent between six to eighteen years in China. Some started out as students in other parts of China, but later moved to Yiwu to avail themselves of its business opportunities. Others came to do business there through either long-term family connections or other networks. Apart from four who had been married before meeting their Chinese wives, most of them came as single men.<sup>3</sup> Once married, most use family union visas to remain in China, which are valid for a year

before renewal. Although strict regulations can complicate visa applications, unlike the African traders in Guangzhou (Methews et al. 2017; Zhou 2017), I did not hear of a single case of anyone overstaying in Yiwu. In terms of the language, the majority speak relatively good Chinese and mainly communicate with their wives in Chinese, albeit sometimes mixing it with English. Two wives are fluent in Arabic, the rest speak English – some well, some poorly.

As for the background of the 33 Chinese wives, 20 are Han Chinese who have converted to Islam having married a Muslim husband, while the other 13 are Chinese Muslims from other ethnic groups. The majority, apart from two who work in other Chinese cities, are migrants to Yiwu. Eighteen of the wives work together with their husbands running family import–export businesses, restaurants or cafés, while the husbands simultaneously engage in international trade. Chinese women often play significant roles in family businesses, ranging from offering business advice to dealing with Chinese markets, suppliers and documentation. Four of these eighteen women also combine *Weishang* – a popular online business model in China in which goods are sold through a social media platform called WeChat – with their family business. *Weishang* refers to the Chinese internal market, as opposed to *waimao*, which refers to international import and export. Eleven women have their own jobs or businesses, including *Weishang*. Some of them had worked with their husbands but later decided to go it alone to avoid the business tensions that were challenging the stability of their marriages, while others deliberately avoided working with their husbands from the beginning for the same reasons. All, however, are prepared to help in their husbands' business when needed, including another four who are housewives.

I got to know the informants by attending the same restaurants, markets or shops, through networks of friends and traders and, later, through the use of snowballing methods. I used a multi-dimensional methodology, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, conversations, unstructured interviews and participating in social events such as barbeques and birthday parties for women or children. I also added the women on the Wechat social media platform, whose updates I followed on a daily basis and with whom I sometimes exchanged messages. I joined a Wechat group that 23 women who had married foreign traders in Yiwu had set up. These platforms provided another way of learning more about their lives.

Despite the local negative view of transnational marriages in Yiwu, the Chinese women I interviewed were almost unanimous in asserting that true love and a real emotional attachment had informed their decision to marry. They tended to highlight the importance of personality, using terms such as 'good guy', 'good Muslim', 'reliable' or 'stable' and only those in bad relationships with their husbands spoke of being 'used' (*bei liyong*). The husbands also tended to highlight the positive elements of the woman's personality and love. None of my informants ever admitted that their main motive was to facilitate business. Real motivations may be diverse and complex, and importantly, life after marriage is more complicated than can be captured by any one-dimensional motivation. For this reason, one should not take the role of marriage in business for granted. I now illustrate this point by exploring the tensions that arise between marriage partners over the question of money.

### **Business, money and husband–wife relations**

In Yiwu, many foreign husbands prefer their Chinese wives to work with them in the family business rather than take on part-time jobs (*dagong*) working for others. The benefits of such cooperation can be considerable, with couples forming strong business teams while benefiting from each other's resources and contributions. Usually, there is a clear division of labour within the business: the Chinese wives take care of Chinese market-related issues, such as interpreting for customers and suppliers, ordering goods, and contacting cargo companies. Their foreign husbands are responsible for introducing foreign clients and everything related to the overseas side of the business, including securing payments from customers. Although couples seek to work for the benefit of their business and family, daily practices of cooperation are complex, and may often present challenges that can involve disputes and negotiations. Moreover, any disagreement within the business may affect a couple's relationship. Money is a common cause of disputes, in which the stereotypes of each partner's culture are invoked. Foreign husbands often claim that Chinese people are concerned only with money and have no sense of 'genuine friendship'. Thus, when it comes to money issues in business – particularly when the wives press their husbands to secure payments from clients – the foreign husbands frequently invoke the stereotype of the money-loving Chinese woman. Chinese wives tend to respond by questioning the morality of foreign Muslims in business, saying that they purposefully delay payment or seek to avoid paying for goods. Such disputes, which affect other aspects of the marriage, are common in Yiwu, as we see in Kaylee's case below.

#### *Foreign husband: the Chinese are concerned only with money*

'Chinese people only think about money, money, money, nothing else ... people have dinner with you just to do business, after dinner no contact. Even if you see them in the market, they pretend not to see you. You are not friends anymore.' This was what Abdullah, Kaylee's Jordanian husband, said at a barbeque hosted by an Egyptian couple when I asked him how he liked living in China. Both Kaylee's husband and his Egyptian friend, Ali, found that the biggest difference between China and the Arabic-speaking countries was the people's attitude towards money and friends. Abdullah repeatedly said that, in his country, if someone were sick, many people would come to visit, but in China no one cared. He had been in China for about ten years and, he told me, has only three Chinese friends, two of which are Kaylee's uncle and aunt. Most of the time he socializes with other Arabic speakers. He said he had grown up in a business family, but even dedicated businesspeople did not behave in this manner in his country. 'When people invite you or say hello to you', he said, 'it is from the heart, it is a real feeling, and you feel connected, but here it is all for money'. 'If you walk in Futian [market]', he went on, 'people see you as dollars and just want to keep something for themselves but not to be friends with you.'

Later, I challenged Abdullah by asking him if most Arabic speakers are good kind-hearted Muslims, then why are there so many complaints from Chinese traders in Yiwu that Arab people flee when they incur significant business debts? He agreed that failing



to repay debts was not good but blamed the problem on the Chinese in Yiwu. First, he thought that, rather than demanding a 30 per cent deposit for goods purchased for resale, Yiwu market should demand the entire cost to be paid on delivery. Second, he felt that Chinese shopkeepers pressed for payment too often; more often than not people fail to sell all the goods they have purchased, so it is only natural that they have no money to pay back. Chinese shops should give clients enough time to pay off their debts. Ali added that goods in China are expensive. He claimed that if Chinese people make something for one dollar, they sell it for four dollars. People buy it but in fact are unhappy 'inside', so 'all fault is Chinese'. Abdullah agreed on this point, asserting that Chinese people have no belief, but are only concerned about this life. 'We are different', he said, 'we care more'. I asked him if he had ever been cheated in business by people from his own country. He admitted that he had once lost 5000 dollars to a trader from his own country. He had searched for him and taken back all the goods, but that only covered one-third of the cost. Therefore, he said, people in business are hard to trust. Nowadays he focuses on established clients and is extremely cautious about dealing with new ones. He used to think the more clients the better, but now prefers a new philosophy – 'the safer the better'.

Abdullah's narrative reveals the existence of perceived cultural differences between traders from China and from Arabic-speaking countries, differences that are especially visible in the fields of money, social relations, religion and business practices between the two regions. More importantly, his narrative also offers us insights into the dynamics of a business environment characterized by high risk, uncertainty, trust and mistrust. These traders do not trust Chinese suppliers. Mistrust is not just based on their own experience but also on perceived cultural differences, themselves informed by the stereotypes they hold about Chinese people. Moreover, they also distrust people from their home country, so each side has to evolve its own strategies for dealing with this mutual mistrust. This to some extent challenges Aslanian's idea that a 'closure' network – namely people from the same community and in this case sharing the same national roots – generating networks of trust. Instead, it is closer to the work of those scholars who note that trust in trading activities is not based solely on ethnic, religious or regional bonds, but also requires business strategies like 'personal fidelity' (Humphrey 2018) and 'diplomacy' (Marsden 2016b).

How do these attitudes towards the Chinese and daily business challenges affect their relationships with their Chinese wives and the management of their business? How do Chinese wives view the situation? Throughout the evening, as Abdullah talked about his family and his experiences in China, he made no attempt to hide the dominant position he held in his conjugal family. Kaylee, by contrast, spoke much less; she just sat quietly beside him, smiling, confirming or sometimes adding something in Chinese. I see Kaylee's behaviour as in keeping with the Chinese custom of respecting one's husband and saving face (*mianzi*) in front of guests. During our meetings over the following couple of months, however, Kaylee started to reveal another dimension of her thinking. This was that she felt that her husband's perception of Chinese people was starting to intrude into their relationship with each another and challenging their own business cooperation.

*Chinese wife: working with her husband and facing a dilemma*

Kaylee, aged 30, came from a small village in Henan province in northern China where she had attended a local technical secondary school (*zhongzhuan*). After her graduation she moved to Yiwu, where she had an uncle, in the hope of finding some work. Her first job was in accounting, but the salary was so low that she decided to set up a stall at the night market in Yiwu. She met her Jordanian husband, who was in his thirties, through a mutual friend at a noodle restaurant (*Lanzhou lamian*) there and, after a six-month courtship, they married. Since they were both poor, they had no wedding ceremony, simply a *nikah* at the mosque.

Kaylee's husband runs an import-export agency between China and Jordan. She has worked for his company since shortly before their marriage, when she took over from a translator who had left following a dispute. There were no other employees and Kaylee worked hard every day. When she fell pregnant and gave birth, they hired other staff, but Kaylee found they lacked commitment and the company lost money as a result. She returned to work when her daughter was eight months' old and would bring her to the office in a pram. Thinking back to that period, Kaylee considered herself 'crazy' (*hao pin ya*), but in her view, outsiders were unreliable, and she felt more secure working in the company herself. Normally, her husband contacts clients, and she is responsible for filling in forms, inspections, packing and shipping. When her husband visits Jordan, Kaylee takes care of the entire business. She also helps her husband's relatives buy goods if they come to China. Not only Kaylee's husband, but also his extended family and even friends benefit from her contribution.

Kaylee and her husband often argue about money and this frequently causes conflicts. For instance, when suppliers press her to settle their bills and clients delay paying their debts, she has to push her husband into asking for the money. Her husband, however, considers Chinese people overly concerned about money and, instead of contacting the clients immediately, quarrels with Kaylee and takes the clients' side in the argument. Kaylee tells her husband that they have to pay their suppliers, who in turn owe money to the factories in which many people, like them, rely on their wages to raise their families. Such arguments are, however, useless. She told me that her husband 'naively believes' that his clients will send them money as soon as they earn it. In fact, they usually have to press them numerous times before they settle. Kaylee is tired of arguing with her husband over business. It makes her look like a stingy person who is only concerned with money, she said. Moreover, her husband complains that she is helping her own people instead of his. She responds that he thinks too much about his own people without considering the position of his immediate family and its relationship with the shopkeepers. They had once endured a period of huge debt when a Jordanian client failed to sell all his goods and was unable to pay them. During those times, Kaylee was under huge pressure: she was sad and upset and often argued with her husband who would say it was a test from Allah. She would then defend herself by questioning the morality of Muslims in business. She asserted that a good Muslim should not put another person or family in difficulty, but this only increased her husband's displeasure. Cooperation between husband and wife, then, is rarely smooth.

Transnational marriage – as a particular type of brokerage – is not a solid entity, but involves different ideas about accounting, both in financial and reputational terms. Although, as mentioned in the last section, a husband might even ‘mistrust’ his own people, in practice he will still show a strong commitment to his own networks. Indeed, there is a hierarchy of preference in the network. A Chinese wife may hold various levels of trust towards her Chinese business partners yet, due to the ‘reputation effect’, which also applies to her husband, she speaks up for the interests of Chinese suppliers. Thus, when the competing interests of two separate networks collide – one needs credit and the other time – instead of lowering the ‘transaction cost’, as Aslanian (2014) assumed, each acts as the agent for a different set of principals and this, in turn, creates tensions and instability in their own relationship. In addition, stereotypes and perceived cultural differences constitute a part of daily business practice and may further fuel tensions. Moreover, the risks of engaging in the same business not only generate financial pressures on family income when business fails, but also trigger emotional tensions that can potentially aggravate spousal relations. Given these challenges, some Chinese women avoid cooperating with their husband’s business. Yet, as we see in the following sections, tensions still arise over the distribution of income.

### **Money, kinship support and cultural disjunctures**

Researchers across disciplines have pointed out that transnational families are central sites for circulating remittances, gifts, care and, in effect, maintaining and developing transnational social fields (Huang et al. 2008; Kudo 2017; Singh et al. 2012). The gifts and money that are circulated are also critical for earning status and prestige within the community of origin, which, in the case of men, is closely connected to the enactment of masculinity (Chu 2010; Osella and Osella 2000; Thai 2006, 2014). In this section, however, I focus on how the exchange of gifts fuels tensions in spousal relations. These tensions arise because different cultural ideas, stereotypes and networks, each with a variety of socioeconomic, relational and emotional dimensions, complicate spousal relations and can affect the stability of the marriage.

Kaylee’s unhappiness about the frequency with which her husband lends money to his friends became increasingly apparent to me throughout my period of fieldwork in Yiwu. She cited a range of occasions on which Abdullah had lost or given substantial amounts of money away to his friends. However, what disturbed her most was the amount of money that her husband spent on his extended family. She said that each time they visited his family, they would buy numerous presents for every family member. After his arrival, his siblings would teasingly coax him into buying them even more gifts. She said that if someone brought her a gift from abroad, she would not expect them to buy anything more, but she found that his siblings would eat midnight snacks while watching TV, which to her was a waste of money. She even had a quarrel with her husband’s oldest sister, who was married and had a job as a schoolteacher, for asking him for money to buy clothes for her husband. While conceding that gifts to parents or single siblings were acceptable, Kaylee felt that this was going too far and confronted her sister-in-law as to why she thought it was necessary. Kaylee had

visited Jordan three times and found the women in her husband's family did not work but spent money extravagantly on clothes, perfume and make-up. At a dinner party that Kaylee's friend Ema hosted in Yiwu, the conversation turned to the consumerism of Arab women. Kaylee and Ema puzzled over why these women did not consider their family or husband. Ema concluded that it was because they never worked and therefore never knew how hard it was to earn money. Moreover, they know that their husbands will never abandon them, for that would be culturally unacceptable, so they just enjoy life. These stereotypes of Arabic women are very different from the ones that these women hold of modern Chinese women (including Muslim ones), whom they see as independent, hardworking but potentially vulnerable to the possibility of abandonment or divorce.

Shortly before our second meeting, Kaylee's husband went to Jordan. While he was packing, Kaylee found an iPad in his bag. When she questioned him about it, he said that his younger brother needed it. 'Then why not tell me?' she asked. 'I was afraid that you would make trouble (*chaojia*) again', he responded. Kaylee was extremely unhappy about this, saying that if they were very rich then it might be OK, but her husband was just too generous and never refused anyone. She understood that he loved his family and, as the eldest son, had a responsibility to help them, but to her, it seemed too much and he insufficiently considered the potential needs of their own child. Kaylee, in contrast, said she had been saving as much as possible and never bought herself anything expensive or extravagant.

Such disputes reflect differences in cultures and consumption practices, which include ideas about supporting kin, attitudes to money and gender roles. However, given the diversity within both China and Arab countries, my analysis goes beyond merely comparing Chinese–Arab cultural differences as Chinese women perceive them. Rather, I seek to show that the transnational networks in which the couple are embedded create both opportunities and tensions in their relationship, particularly when the couple has limited resources to distribute. Different values and ideologies play a key role in shaping the nature of such disputes and, among these, tensions between different family orientations are especially salient. The conjugal family is becoming increasingly central to the ideology and practice of contemporary China (Selden 1993; Sha 2017; Yan 2009), with Chinese women often more oriented towards it than their foreign husbands who, by contrast, are perceived to be more oriented towards the extended family. This raises the question of how to create a balance between the needs of both the conjugal family and the extended network. For husbands, supporting the extended family is not just a way of fulfilling family obligations and retaining links with their original community, but it can also provide an escape mechanism should the marriage in China fail. However, the competing interests of conjugal and extended networks generate tensions when the distribution of resources is imbalanced. More importantly, other cultural ideas and stereotypes about the self and other play a significant role in creating disjuncture in perceptions of balance and views about who should be supported and to what extent. In this sense, we should not underestimate the significance of couples' transnational backgrounds. Although recent scholars on transnational marriage tend to focus on migration, especially legal or

institutional regulations, citizenship issues, gender and power relations in marriage, and opportunities to acquire social capital, less attention has been paid to cross-cultural interaction and integration. Nevertheless, as the ethnography presented above demonstrates, different cultural values, practices and stereotypes are an important aspect of the daily interactions of couples and their place in extended social networks, and they thus also play a part in the stability or instability of their marriages.

In addition, I stress that the wider context in which such a marriage occurs influences its cultural aspects. For example, since marrying a Chinese woman does not entitle the foreign husband to claim Chinese citizenship, uncertainty about settlement is a major concern for the couple. In another article (Sha 2019), I illustrate how socio-economic aspects and institutional regulation (internal and international migration laws) create uncertainty in settlement, putting many women in a worrying position or even ‘forcing’ them to move to their husband’s country or a third country. Given the importance of citizenship, many foreign husbands might even find it necessary to invest in their extended networks. Their Chinese wives also have concerns of their own. Because of the household registration (*hukou*) system, it is not just they who are excluded from the social welfare system, but their children also have difficulty accessing the local public schools; the rising costs of living and of children’s education in China merely exacerbate the situation. Thus, the women may prefer to keep the resources available for their conjugal family. Meanwhile, their hard work and contribution to the family business stand in sharp contrast to the stereotypical image they hold of their pampered Arabic counterparts who are not expected to work, thus accentuating the discourse of ‘cultural difference’ as a factor in marital tension.

In sum, seeing the extended kinship network as important ‘social capital’ and a crucial part of the ‘multiplex’ connections to which Aslanian (2014) referred, does not necessarily facilitate a couple’s cooperation in business, but it might generate unnecessary burdens and conflicts and promote the functions of this particular type of brokerage.

### **Risks of excessive gift-giving, trust and uncertainty in married life**

Through another case study, I now demonstrate that the particular brokerage roles constituted by transnational marriage are not solid. I draw attention to uncertainty in married relations (without the intervention of extended social networks), and trust or mistrust towards each other within this union and towards future life. I also continue to explore the consequences of excessive gift giving to a husband’s extended family.

Sofia is a Hui woman from Beijing who had married her ex-husband 12 years before I interviewed her. At the time they met, Sofia, who spoke fluent Arabic, worked as a translator for a foreign import–export company in Guangzhou. Her ex-husband worked at a restaurant. Shortly before their marriage, they decided to open their own import–export agency. According to her and her friends, Sophia had considered divorce several times in the past because of the many problems she encountered in her marital relationship, but she decided to stay in the marriage for the sake of their children. One year before I met her, she had experienced the ‘worst luck ever’ when

her clients fled without paying for goods, which put them into serious debt. Lacking the financial capacity to pay her suppliers, concerned about the security of her children and afraid that her suppliers might kidnap them to force payment, she agreed to her husband's suggestion that they move to his home country, Jordan. In Jordan, however, Sophia was not allowed to work. She was expected to take care of her parents-in-law and extended family. Her husband did not work either but hung out with his friends spending the money they had earned. Sophia could see no future. She said, '*he xi bei feng qu a?*', literally 'drink the northwest wind', meaning that there is nothing to support life, or 'what are we going to eat in future?' She decided to return to China and, little by little, started to pay back their debt. Soon after she left, however, her husband married a second wife. Feeling deeply hurt, Sophia filed for divorce, but her three children were still in Jordan where her husband told them that their mother only loved money and not them, which turned her children against her.

Sofia felt desperate and found it hard to understand how her husband could act in this way when she had sacrificed everything for his family. According to her, her husband spent all their previous earnings on helping his parents buy a house and land in Jordan. Whenever her parents-in-law visited them, they would pay all the costs and the gifts that they brought to her husband's relatives during their visits were countless. Moreover, before they married, her husband would send remittances of \$200 a month to his parents; after their marriage, he increased the sum to \$500 a month. Sophia said that she had not worried about this money in the past because she thought that they were young and could earn money as long as they were healthy. Now, at much cost, she realized that not all Arab people are either good or reliable Muslims. With deep regret and pain, Sofia is under great pressure to pay the debts alone.

Sofia's story quickly spread to others who had married foreigners in Yiwu. The other wives took it as a lesson that men are unreliable (*bu kaopu*), that their marriages and the future are unpredictable (*bu hao shuo*), so it is risky to give too much support to a husband's family.

This is an extreme case of a Chinese woman who, forced to migrate due to trading risks, lost everything through supporting her husband's family without considering her own self-interest. Yet, it delivered a clear message that married life is uncertain. Many transnational marriages in Yiwu end in separation. Although the reasons vary from case to case, they all reinforce the idea that married life is unpredictable and this sense of uncertainty about the future has an effect on their current relationships. This lack of trust and confidence in the survival of their marriages is particularly marked when it comes to dealing with money, which fundamentally affects the way the partners consider their economic interests. In other words, uncertainty about the future increases the tensions inherent in the brokerages of the present. Moreover, according to these women, since 'men are unreliable' (*bu kaopu*), the degree of trust between the couple is in question. I found that many women who married foreign traders distrusted their husbands. Chinese women's concept of 'trust' has several connotations, including men's honesty, commitment, loyalty and faithfulness.

Many scholars see trust as a future-oriented positive expectation about the intentions or behaviour of another in circumstances of uncertainty or risk (Dietz et al.

2010: 10; Humphrey 2018; Luhmann 1988). Yet, scholars also note that mistrust (as an initial stance towards others) and distrust (as a consequence of being let down) are equally important as they may be mobilized to predict the intentions and capability of others (Cook et al. 2005; Humphrey 2018). Thus, the mistrust involved in married relations reinforces a sense of uncertainty about the future, which affects behaviour – in this case, in terms of dealing with money or exchanging gifts. Unlike Sofia, most women in Yiwu protect their own economic interests in both the business and marriage, particularly given their mistrust of their husbands and of married life. I often heard older women advise newlyweds to keep a secret stash of money (*sifangqian*) aside just in case their marriage failed. Such mistrust then encourages them to pursue their separate interests within the special brokerage characteristic of a transnational couple and to extend their separate social networks, thus creating even further tensions.

### **Consumption, friendship, and consuming Yiwu**

While tensions exist over the husbands' gift giving to their extended families, the wives' extended families in Yiwu generate far less monetary tension. This is because Chinese families tend to prioritize their daughters' needs over their own, so rarely expect financial support from them. Affluent parents may even give financial support to a couple. However, this does not mean that the husbands have no complaints about their women. In this last section, I draw attention to another common source of tension over money – the husbands' discontent over their wives' consumerism. Here, the relevant external network is not extended family, but the wife's friendship group.

'My wife expects me to behave like a Chinese, earning money and bring all the money to her. She just spends, no matter whether she needs things or not, [she] just buy, buy.' This was the response of an African husband when I asked him how he felt about marrying a Chinese wife. His wife, Sun Li, had complained a lot to me about their financial difficulties and her husband's paltry contribution to the family's income. However, when he joined us for dinner at a restaurant, she said nothing, but stood some distance from the table holding her baby. When the conversation turned into a marital argument following the husband's stereotyping of Chinese people as 'only concerned with money' and describing his wife as 'just pressing for money', I suggested we leave because it was indeed getting very late. Although this tension over money again reflects perceived cultural differences and stereotypes, it also raises another topic – women's consumerism. Throughout my stay in Yiwu, I noticed that women who married foreigners were to various degrees involved in consumerism, particularly online shopping. I heard from my informants that some husbands have a problem with this, particularly in families on a tight budget like Sun Li's. Other husbands did not object when they spent money, but if they challenged them for spending too much on their extended families or friends, they would retaliate by pointing out that they themselves consumed far too much and should have saved that money. As most husbands never discussed their family finances with me in the field, I can hardly see it from their perspective, but it is clear that if the women consume too much in the eyes of their

foreign husbands it creates considerable dissatisfaction. From my observations, however, the women's consumerism derives not only from the consumerist atmosphere in China and competition for social status, but also that it is closely associated with the particular position of Yiwu as a small-commodity centre and the recent development of e-commerce. Moreover, I want to stress that, for these Chinese women, consumption also serves as a strategy for building social networks and overcoming potential insecurity in life.

Yiwu, as a world commodity centre, plays a crucial role in shaping the consumerist lifestyles of Chinese wives. Almost everyone living in Yiwu is involved in various types of business or business-related services. In particular, with the recent boom in online business in China and the fashioning of *weishang* (e-commerce) among the Chinese, Yiwu has become a major supplier of online products and a popular base for the supply of cheap goods. Yiwu residents take full advantage of these opportunities and are involved in various types of *weishang*; about half my informants who married foreign Muslims are involved in it. They not only sell Chinese products but also specialities from their husbands' countries. For instance, Arab products such as soaps or saffron are particularly popular among the Chinese as they are considered more genuine than the Chinese ones. This preference for foreign goods benefits those who are able to supply them. Yet, booming *weishang* in Yiwu and the opportunities it offers mean that no one can really escape from the shopping trap. While some fall into it unconsciously or reluctantly, others do it deliberately to support a friend's business, which in turn helps to forge friendships and create networks that may eventually benefit all involved. In a word, shopping can be a form of networking.

Chinese women married to foreigners in Yiwu are involved in complex networks that can be sources of business, but maintaining these networks often involves consumption. One of their major networks is referred to as sisters (*jiemei*) – mainly constituted by women married to foreigners. They form a significant social circle and also become the primary customers of those women within the circle who engage in *weshang*. 'Sisters' often buy goods from each other, which cements their relationships. 'Sisters' are seen as reliable suppliers of desired goods, but purchases may also be made to help each other, particularly their less prosperous 'sisters'.

This logic of 'buy to support' and 'buy to network' is not just a life strategy but also a business one. It has deep roots in the Chinese culture of *guanxi* – the webs of relations through which an individual can achieve various ends (Osburg 2013). Anthropologist, Croll, pointed out that, due to the absence or under-development of formal horizontal mechanisms across government departments and administrative units in the post-reform years, the importance of inter-personal networks, or '*guanxi*' connections, 'became essential to all aspects of social, political and commercial life' (Croll 2006: 48–9). The exchange of goods and money was also used to establish and maintain social networks in the interests of enhancing social relations and facilitating access to resources, services and favours with kin, friends or officials (Croll 2006: 48–9). Others noted the necessity of outside connections beyond kinship ties to commodity production and market related activities (Yan 2009: 103)



and the importance of consciously investing in these networks to benefit business (Osburg 2013). Osburg argued that the moral economies of *guanxi* networks are at the very heart of ‘capitalist’ development in China (Osburg 2013: 32). Chinese women in Yiwu are highly aware of the importance of *guanxi* networks in business. As Sun Li complained to me during a later meeting, ‘in China, from your birth to your death, it is all about *guanxi*, not to mention in business.’ She says that *laowai* (foreigners) like her husband are failing to understand these networks, for he complains about her spending money when in fact she is simply investing in *guanxi* networks.

## Conclusion

In this article, I challenge simplistic assumptions about the role of transnational marriage in trading networks through the lenses of money and uncertainty in marriage. Based on network structural analysis, I have shown that combining business and marriage networks adds extra tensions to the relationship. I see this marriage type as a specific form of brokerage that binds the couple through business and marriage while meanwhile bringing together two separate but closed networks (clients and suppliers). Although I do not deny that such unions bring many benefits to both husbands and wives through effective resource exchange and the maximization of social capital, it is an unstable form of brokerage. I highlighted three factors that contribute to this instability. First, it is embedded in complex commercial and marriage networks that, in interacting with competing interests, create instability. Second, different cultural ideas, values, stereotypes and concepts of trust/mistrust become entangled in business practices and daily life so thus intensify the tensions. Finally, the living context of the marriage plays a crucial role. In other words, we need to understand the instability of such marriages in the specific context of Yiwu. On the one hand, foreign husbands have no access to Chinese citizenships or residency papers, so they are always likely to be hedging their bets and planning for a different life. On the other hand, the socio-economic constraints posed on marital life, particularly instability in trade and in the global market, income insecurity, lack of social welfare due to their migrant status and household registration (*hukou*) system, and the rising cost of living and of educating children in China, often exacerbates these tensions. These dynamics in turn help to shape the discourse of ‘culture’ and the couple’s stereotypes of one another. In sum, the network structures, with their cultural and ideological aspects, combined with socio-economic reality, put layers of pressure on transnational families and create more uncertainty in their relationships.

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## Notes

1. According to the imam of the Yiwu mosque, in 2012 there were an estimated 35,000 Muslims in Yiwu, half of them thought to be from overseas, with many from Arab countries (Baoquan 2012). In 2015, according to the *China Daily*, there were 15,000 foreign traders, most of whom were Arabs (Bhattacharjya 2015).
2. The original data also included a couple in which the wife was Chinese and the husband a New Zealander. Since neither is Muslim, they are not included in this article. However, the couple argued in front of me during our lunch meeting, showing tensions and patterns of stereotyping similar to those presented here.
3. In these four cases, the women became embroiled in polygamy, although one of the men did divorce his Indian wife on marrying the Chinese woman. Another woman became involved in polygamy after marriage through her husband having an affair with a woman from Thailand and later legalizing the relationship. This led to the divorce of the Chinese woman from her husband.

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