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*Special issue introduction*

**Asia-Europe intimate links:  
Family migrants, binational couples and mixed-parentage children**

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**Introduction**

The social unit of the family has been one of the principal channels and drivers of contemporary migration. The family-shaped movement of people is known in the literature as “family-related migration” (Kofman, 2004), and more recently as “family migration” (Cooke, 2008)—“migration events that are made within the context of a family” and/or “with respect to events in the lives of distant, extended family members” (ibid.: 260). This phenomenon includes family formation, family reunification, accompanying family and international adoption (Migration Data Portal, 2020). It takes place alongside or overlaps with other migratory movements such as labor, student, climate-/war-induced and sexual migrations. Among the migration corridors in the world today, it is the Asia-Europe one that continues to attract scholarly attention due to its dynamic human mobility. In 2019, for instance, there were almost 22 million Asian migrants in Europe, whereas in Asia, “Europeans comprise the largest group of migrants from outside” of this continent (International Organization for Migration, 2020: 68).

In this special issue, we delve into the intimate links connecting the geographical regions of East, Southeast and South Asia to Western Europe. We define “intimate links” as interpersonal relationships characterized by different expressions of sentiments, ideas and aspirations. The qualifier “intimate” here originates from the term “intimacy” that Reis and Shaver (1988: 387) define as “interpersonal process within which two interaction partners experience and express feelings, communicate verbally and nonverbally, satisfy social motives, augment or reduce social fears, talk and learn about themselves and their unique characteristics, and become “close” in psychological and “often” physical terms. Based on this definition, we fixate our attention to interpersonal processes taking place in migrant families and “mixed” couples in which the partners have “different nationalities and/or ethnicities” (De Hart et al., 2013: 995). Since “matters of intimacy” are “matters of state” (Stoler, 2001), we take into account how state policies alongside other macro-structural forces shape interpersonal processes and the relations of power within the realm of home.

The literature on migrations in Asia-Europe migration corridor focuses on these processes and relations, notably involving adult migrants (e.g., De Valk et al., 2004; Charsley, 2005; Pitkänen and Korpela, 2014; Wang, 2015; Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017). This tendency highlights the need for studies centered on other family members such as spouses (e.g., Charsley, 2005; Plambech, 2009; Fresnoza-Flot, 2013; Wang, 2017a; Chen, 2019) and children (e.g., Suksomboon, 2009; Souralova, 2014; Barber, 2015; Wang, 2017b; Fresnoza-Flot, 2018, 2020).

Moreover, scholarly works mostly concentrate on women's perspectives, overlooking as a result the viewpoints of men and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer) migrants. Aware of these lacunas, the present special issue underlines the findings from recently conducted empirical studies in different research fields: migration, family, gender, sexuality and socio-legal studies. It has three principal objectives: first, to compare to one another the migration and family experiences of Asian migrants, citizens and non-citizens, in the European context; second, to identify intersecting factors shaping the family dynamics and experiences of these migrants and their family members; and third, to pinpoint the manifold stakes of migration, conjugality, parenthood and childhood.

To attain these aims, this special issue pays attention to the gender dimension of Asian migrants' and their families' experiences, as well as to the intersectionality of gender with other "categories of difference" (Crenshaw, 1989), which (re)produces constraints and disadvantages in their lives. It also joins feminist scholars' call for consideration of the relational, experiential and subjective characters of gender and the importance of the generation factor in the analysis (e.g., Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki, 2017). By doing so, it brings to the fore the agency of women, men and transgender migrants. It examines their conjugal lives, intergenerational relations, embeddedness in larger kin networks and self-(re)making in migration setting. It also underlines not only the perspectives of adults but also those of young people whose parentage is described here as "mixed," either because of their ethnically mixed parents or because of being partly raised by someone not biologically related to them. Hence, this special issue contributes fresh empirical insights to the continuously growing literature of Asian migrations (see Liu-Farrer and Yeoh, 2019), notably concerning its intimate dimensions (see the part about Asia in Rocha and Aspinall, 2020).

Before presenting the five articles comprising the special issue, the following sections revisit first the corpus of works on family migration involving migrant families and their children, as well as mixed couples in the Asia-Europe migration corridor. These brief reviews intend to bring out the originality and scholarly contributions of this special issue.

### **Family migration: The case of Asian migrants and their children in Europe**

Scholars observe that migration reconfigures substantially family and intergenerational relationships (Fass, 2005; Gardner, 2012; Alipio et al., 2015), notably the care circulation (Baldassar and Merla, 2013) between migrants' family and extended kin networks. On European soil, some descendants of Asian migrants are 1.5 generations: born and "left-behind" (Parreñas, 2005; Graham et al., 2012; Hoang and Yeoh, 2012) in Asia, they joined their parents later for "family reunification" (Wang, 2014; Fresnoza-Flot, 2015). Years of separation change the ways how Asian parents and their children interact in everyday life and impact the well-being of the latter (Bohr and Tse, 2009; Nagasaka, 2015; Wang, 2017b; Lam et al., 2019). In the other direction, some children of Asian migrants born in Europe have been sent back to their countries of origin, often taken care of by their grandparents who have stayed behind. This phenomenon has been studied in the case of the care circulation in four-generation transnational Zhejianese families in Spain and China (Lamas-Abraira, 2019). In addition to this, the role of grandparents in the childcare arrangements in Asian communities in Europe has been demonstrated, through the case studies carried out among Chinese and Bangladeshi households in Britain (Lie, 2010) and among Chinese families residing in France (Wang and Schwartz, 2016). There is also the case in which Asian parents seek the care work of non-family members, like for example Vietnamese entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic who rely on Czech nannies to care for their children (Souralová, 2014, 2016). All these transnational family configurations profoundly shape "mothering" (Parreñas, 2005; Liamputtong, 2006) and "fathering" (McKay, 2015) in the context of migration.

Once generations reunite and live under the same roof in Europe, the intergenerational relationships continue to be characterized by the transmission of both material and symbolic

resources (knowledge, skills, languages, memories, values and representations). Among the Asian families settled in Europe, children always play an important role in the mediation of languages and cultures for their newly arrived migrant parents (Guo, 2014). Generations of parents and children may have very different definitions of “success,” professional aspirations and upward mobility (Gardner and Mand, 2012). For example, it is shown that descendants of Chinese migrants residing in Europe hardly change the image of Chinese business inherited from their parents in Italy (Merchionne and Liu, 2016), Spain (Masdeu Torruella, 2020) and France as well as in China (Wang, 2019).

At a more subjective level, the transmission of life stories, migratory memories and affections related to transnational mobility might reduce the emotional distance between generations, repair intergenerational misunderstandings and foster the identity building of descendants of Asian migrants (Mariani, 2012; Marsden, 2014; Wang, 2017b). The question of the identification and belonging of migrants’ children (Glick Schiller and Fouron, 2002; Levitt and Waters, 2002; Somerville, 2008; Friedman and Schultermand, 2011) deserves to be analyzed in detail through a case study of Asian families living in Europe (e.g., Barber, 2015), which remains largely unexamined, unlike in North America (e.g., Kibria, 1997; Louie, 2004; Min, 2002; Zhou, 2009). Among the empirical studies carried out in Europe with Asian families, works on the identification of Chinese descendants have received much attention in Britain (Li, 2011; Yeh, 2014), Italy (Raffaetà, et al., 2015), Spain (Robles-Llana, 2018) and other countries such as France and Germany (Liu and Wang, 2020) through a broader European perspective (Thunø and Li, 2020). The above corpus of studies provides a better understanding of experiences and social trajectories of children with Asian origin in Western European societies. Children with Asian origin are under-researched compared to children from non-Asian ethnic backgrounds, which the present Special Issue attempts to address albeit at a limited scale.

### **Asian-European intimate unions and mixed couples**

Since the colonial times, Asian-European intimate unions have been documented in European-colonized Asian societies<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Stoler, 2002) and Asian countries that were not subjected to European colonial rule<sup>2</sup> (e.g., Loos, 2008). In Europe, mixed unions between Europeans and Asians also took place during the colonial period but appear less in scale than that observed in European colonies in Asia. This may be partly due to limited possibilities of colonized Asian subjects to move to Europe at that time. In the contemporary postcolonial world, characterized by fast technologies of communication and transportation, the mixed union phenomenon involving Asians and Europeans takes a new turn with more and more Asians moving to Europe for marriage and family formation.

These intimate unions involve either ethnically homogamous or ethnically heterogamous couples (see Eeckhaut et al., 2011). The first category concerns partners with similar ethnicity but with different nationalities. Such “transnational marriage” (Charsley, 2012) has been widely observed among British South Asians getting married to partners from their (grand)parents’ countries of origin (Charsley and Shaw, 2006; Pande, 2014; Qureshi, 2016). Similar cases can also be found in Italy and Belgium within South Asians’ diasporic populations (Cloet et al., 2012; Bonfanti, 2015). The second category of Asian-European intimate unions is formed between partners with different ethnicities and nationalities. The literature on these marriages flourishes alongside the rich body of studies on “marriage migration”—“migration within or as a result of marriage” (Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008: 23)—notably involving women from Southeast and East

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<sup>1</sup> This is the case, for example, of French Indochina (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam); Dutch East Indies (Indonesia); Spanish Philippines; British India (split into two dominions in 1947: India and Pakistan), Malaya (Malaysia), and Burma (Myanmar); as well as Portuguese, Dutch and then British Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

<sup>2</sup> Countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Thailand did not undergo European colonization but experienced their presence and influence in their respective societies mainly due to commercial exchanges.

Asia, such as Thailand, the Philippines and China (e.g., Lauser, 2008; Suksomboon, 2009; Wang, 2017a). Recently, Europe has become a destination place for LGBTQ migrants from Asian countries, including Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand (Min, 2018; Pijpers and Maas, 2014; Thongkrajai, 2012). These migrants sometimes form intimate relations within the context of sex work (Pravattiyagul, 2018), which is also the case of some heterosexual migrants like Northern Chinese women in Paris (Lévy and Lieber, 2009). In addition, scholars are starting to look at both ends of the Asia-Europe migration corridor, that is, examining European migration to Asia and Asian migration to Europe (e.g., Statham et al., 2020).

The above literature unveils different power dynamics affecting interpersonal relationships and interactions at the micro (individual, couple, family), meso (institutions and cross-border ties) and macro (state-migrant relations) levels. Most of them examine migration processes through the vantage point of adults, mainly women and heterosexual migrants. Many studies also concentrate on widely known processes linked to particular ethnic, nationality or gender categories, like for instance the marriage migration of Thai and Filipino women. These scholarly tendencies result in the neglect of the “others” perspectives and situations in the Asia-Europe migration corridor. Hence, the present special issue strives to shed light on their overshadowed voices and socially invisible cases, which can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Asia-Europe intimate links.

### **The special issue: Experiences of the overlooked “others”**

Five empirical papers compose the present special issue, focusing respectively on Vietnamese migrant families, South Asian-Italian families, Thai transgender women called *kathoeys*, Chinese migrant spouses of Swiss men and Filipino/European men in mixed couples. The individuals concerned reside in different European countries: Czech Republic, Italy, The Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, the United Kingdom of Great Britain (UK) and Switzerland.

Two articles take into account parents and children in the analysis, which unveils the modes of parenting, childhood dynamics, tensions and aspirations in their households. In her study of intergenerational relations in Vietnamese migrant families in the Czech Republic, Souralova observes how parents’ migratory experience, educational aspiration for their children and post-migratory situation affect parent-child relationships. She remarks about the awareness of Vietnamese second-generation children regarding their parents’ “tough life” and migration trajectory, as well as the history of Vietnamese migration to the Czech Republic. Souralova also identifies the way Vietnamese parents define their parenthood as “education-oriented,” as proxy-reliant and as filled with “discrepant” expectations with regards to their children’s ethnic identity and belonging. To reconcile work and family life, Vietnamese parents resort to Czech nannies to care for their children. This care arrangement facilitates Vietnamese children’s mastery of the Czech language but affects their Vietnamese language competence. Although they hold critical views about their parents, they recognize their parents’ sacrifice for the sake of their future. Souralova’s study puts to the fore the meanings of migrant parenthood and migrant childhood, and the often painful, ambivalent family processes that underlie migration.

Likewise, Bonfanti include parents and children in her analysis of the slowly emerging phenomenon of mixed couple formation involving South Asians and Italians in Italy, where the biggest number of Hindustani migrants can be found in mainland Europe. Through the notion of “kinning” (Howell, 2003) and drawing from intense ethnographic fieldwork, she decorticates the making of relatedness in three mixed families: first, a Pakistani man with his Italian wife and step-daughter; second, an Indian man with his Italian wife and three children; and third, a Sri Lankan woman with her Italian husband and two young children. She observes that these families keep “at safe distance” their kin and that their daily lives are “anchored in a localized dimension,” that is, they are attached to their place of residence in Italy. The shifts these families undergo concern the transformation of ideologies about marriage and childrearing,” as well as the reformulation of kinship beyond the biological and legal dimensions. In addition, the children

in the families examined show ambivalent desire to be part of their parents' respective worlds and adopt strategies to face social challenges linked to their mixed belonging.

One article on mixed relationships in the present special issue takes a different direction by privileging the unheard voices of Thai transgender women (*kathoey*) in the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and the UK. Pravattiyagul uncovers the reasons behind the migration of this minority group to Europe: economic reasons; state and street discriminations, employment issues and desire for improved social class status in Thailand; a romanticized vision of life in Europe; and desires for "normal" lives and romantic relationships. At the individual level, the author finds out the impact of interviewed *Kathoey's* gendered morality, social class, ethnicity and romantic visions of the West on their experiences in Europe. At the macro level, she pinpoints Thai policies, European political economy and the different gender and sexuality ideologies shaping their lives and binational relationships. Pravattiyagul unveils European men's stereotypes regarding *kathoey*, and vice-versa. She also remarks about how *kathoey* use European's stereotypes about them to maintain their binational unions. Compared to Thai women, *kathoey*, according to the author, are "less submissive in cross-cultural relationships" and enjoy "open" or "liberal" relationships in sexual term. Their binational relationships boost their feminine identity.

The last two articles in the special issue give voices to migrant women and men, as well as to European men in mixed couples. The first article by Chen is a pioneering study of Chinese-Swiss couples in Switzerland. It demonstrates the agency of Chinese women in countering gender discrimination in China's marriage market, where highly educated, aged and divorced women are stigmatized. Through their marriage with Swiss men and their migration to Switzerland, these women escaped the discriminating social norms in their country of origin. However, when they arrived in their new country, they found themselves living the traditional Swiss gender regime in which the men in the family fulfil the productive role and women the reproductive role. Swiss welfare and taxation systems further reinforce this gender regime and impede the interviewed women to engage in the labor market. To confront the discrimination in the labor market concerning gender, ethnicity and nationality, Chinese migrant spouses adopt strategies such as relying on their human capital, refusing inappropriate unskilled jobs and accumulating work experiences. Chen shows that these women are not passive, but real actors of their own life.

Finally, the research note by Fresnoza-Flot highlights the socially invisible case of Filipino men in couple with European women in Belgium and the Netherlands and compares their experience to that of their European counterparts in couple with Filipino women. Through the lens of masculinity, the author analyzes the logics of these men's decision to form a mixed relationship and shows how this union affects their sense of masculinity. She finds out that social class, age, nationality and country of origin (economically developed or not) shape the gender dynamics in the interviewed men's home. Whereas Filipino men reconfigure their masculine self to align themselves with the gender equality principle that their European wives pursue, European men's masculinity gets reinforced as they pursue a gendered division of labor in their home with Filipino women. Both groups of men resort to different strategies to maintain or reinforce their masculine selves depending on their wives' behaviors and practice of resistance, which illustrates how the institution of marriage serves as an arena where gender identities meet, collide and converge.

In sum, the five contributions illuminate the importance of taking into account the context of the country of origin, notably its gender norms and ideologies (Chen; Fresnoza-Flot; Pravattiyagul), to understand better the logic of migrants' decisions as regards marriage, parenting and self-(re)making. They also demonstrate the complexities of the Asia-Europe migration corridor and the various intimate links and processes formed within it (Bonfanti; Souralova). These links do not always appear as "intimate" as they are, as ambivalences, tensions and mixed feelings characterize family relationships in space and time.

## **Conclusion: Main findings and future research directions**

The special issue delved on the intimate links in Asia-Europe migration corridor featuring migratory movements related to couple and the whole family unit. The links explored here are not strictly biological but social and sexual as well. Comparing the experiences of Asian migrants and their family members in Europe allowed us to identify intersecting factors shaping their lives and the manifold stakes of migration, conjugality, parenthood and childhood.

The empirical cases in this special issue uncover how micro-level factors such as romantic visions of the West, fantasies and/or aspirations for the good life (in social class and gender terms) could inspire Asian heterosexual and transgender individuals to migrate to Europe. The cases examined also confirm previous observations on how the intersection of different categories of difference produces marginalities and challenges in the lives of social minorities (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989). Gender, social class, ethnicity, nationality and to the least extent sexuality are salient interacting categories in the lives of Asian migrants and their families studied in this special issue, which fashion not only their migration trajectory but also their social incorporation in their respective countries of residence.

At the macro level, larger structural factors affect the migration and settlement experiences of Asian migrants, which vividly echoes the findings of several works in the field of migration studies. State policies (specifically regarding migration, welfare and taxation), labor market condition and gender norms/ideologies in their countries of origin and immigration constitute the social context in which these migrants and their families inhabit. What the special issue finds out is that although intersecting categories of difference do shape individual's migration decision and family lives, what make them simultaneously interact at a given space and time are contextual factors that radiate both opportunities and constraints. They make salient specific categories and drive them to intersect with one another or with other categories, producing certain disadvantages and precariousness.

What appears to be facilitating the lives of many Asian migrants and their family members are their social ties embedded in ethnic and religious communities, associations and friendship networks. These social ties provide them with resources and assistance in the receiving countries. Asian migrants' reliance on these ties, as well as the different strategies they adopted to confront the challenges in the labor market and the domestic realm illustrate well their agency. As they manage their lives in Europe, they deal with the consequences of their migration: irregularity in migration status, dependence on their European partners at least during the first few years in Europe, and emotional links with their children. With regard to children, there is often ambivalence concerning the socio-cultural path they would pursue—that of their parents or the one they are creating in their country of residence. Although there are tensions and mixed feelings in family relationships, many children show understanding of their parents' choices and ways of living.

The above findings suggest some future research directions for the study of intimate links in the Asia-Europe migration corridor. First, the meso dimension of the said links should be further investigated, specifically the interaction among Asian migrants, their descendants and institutions or key social actors representing or in direct contact with Asian families or communities. A few examples include social actors in the school, workplace, public spaces and services, local government agencies, immigration bureaus and police departments. Second, Asia-Europe intimate links should be studied through the prism of social and political participation of migrants and their children. Further heightened by the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the questions of the representativeness and social images of people of (real or supposed) Asian origin, as well as the discrimination and racism they experienced in Europe, are more challenging than ever (Wang et al., 2020). Third, the role of grandparents, who reside either in the country of origin or in Western Europe, should be taken into account in analyzing the intimate realm of Asian migrants' lives. How do these migrants articulate and negotiate childcare with elderly care in a migratory context? What are the moral stakes of care through three or even four generations of Asian families? Finally, this special issue focusing on the European context calls for critical

attention to the couple and family experiences of European migrants in Asia as a counterpoint case. The cross-border social spaces that these migrants create and inhabit could unveil relations of power, which may be different from what we observe in Europe among Asian migrants and their families.

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