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**Migrate to divorce, to overcome divorce, or to avoid divorce?  
Divorce and migration nexus among Chinese (wo)men migrants in Paris**

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I am the author of this article. Data comes from my original fieldwork in Paris. Information on interviewees was anonymized. This article was written during a post doctorate fellowship in a Project Emergences, funded by Paris city.

**Abstract**

Drawing on ten-year ethnographic fieldwork in France and China with Northern Chinese migrants in Paris, this paper analyzes the imbrication of divorce and migration. Most women had divorced before leaving China, a smaller group divorced after arriving in France, many of them try to remarry abroad, while men respondents were almost all married in China. Relying on an intersectional approach and a transnational perspective, this paper unveils how married or divorcee status have influenced their choices to move or to remain in China, to stay abroad or return. More generally, it examines how the gendered social norms on family, marriage and divorce shape migrants' agency and how it may vary according to social class, gender, age, marital and migration status. The paper questions the transnational power of gender norms and observes how the scripts on family and divorce in China traverse state borders and continue to structure migrants' transnational experiences.

**Keywords:** divorce and migration, Chinese migrants in France, gender norms, family norms migration motivations, transnational migration

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## **Introduction**

After decades of Chinese State's strict control on international movements, migration to Europe became a new option in Northern China at the turn of the century (Xiang, 2007). Semi-legal travel agencies sprang-up, advertising the high wages abroad and suggesting that it was easy to find a highly paid job abroad. For the equivalent of 3,000 to 8,000 euros, they provided a legal short-term tourist visa and a plane ticket to Europe. In this region, France is the principal destination country, where an estimated 300,000-500,000 Chinese migrants reside (Ma Mung, 2015). Since the end of the 1990s, the arrival of tens of thousands of urban Northern Chinese migrants has changed the socio-demography of the Chinese community in the Parisian region.

There is no official statistical data on these migrants who are mostly undocumented. Nonetheless, studies show that most of them were pioneer, lone migrants in their 40s and were part of middle or lower-middle class in China in the 1980s and 1990s (Cattelain et al., 2002; Lévy, 2015; Rocca, 2016). They were (or had been) married and had one adolescent child stay behind. Interestingly, two-thirds of these migrants were women (Gao & Poisson, 2005; Pina-Guerassimoff, 2002), and two out of three had divorced before or after they arrived in France unlike most of their men counterparts (Lévy, 2015). The preeminence of middle-aged divorced women in this migration is even more noticeable when compared with the low divorce rate in China, especially in their generation at the time of their departure (Ma, 2018). This reality sparks the question of to what extent the issues of divorce and migration are intertwined in their migration experiences. How do gender norms on marriage, family and divorce in China shape Chinese migrants' agency and experiences? How do these experiences vary according to social class, gender, age, marital (divorced or married) and migration status (legal residence or undocumented)?

This study replies to these questions by adopting an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) with a transnational perspective (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1991). An intersectional lens allows the study to grasp in which specific situation categories of differences such as age, social class, gender, ethnic, matrimonial or legal status become important or not in the lives of Chinese migrants. A transnational approach, on the other hand, facilitates understanding on how the interactions of specific social markers shape migrants' constraints and resources in China and France during the migration process. The "transborder intersectional" (Fresnoza-Flot & de Hart in this Special Issue) approach gives fresh insights into migrants' agency, rationality, emotions and subjective points of view.

The following sections provide an overview of the literature on divorce and migration, explain the legal and social context of divorce in China, describe the study's data-gathering methods and the respondents. The core of the paper focuses on migration-divorce nexus and its various forms.

## **Migration and the issue of divorce**

Studies on transnational families abound. They especially focus on family formation across borders and especially on "mixed couples" formed by spouses with different nationalities or ethnicities (Constable, 2005; Collet & Unterreiner, 2017; Fresnoza-Flot & Ricordeau, 2017; Odasso, 2016). However, divorce in a context of transnational migration is less documented although it concerns a large number of persons. Except in few cases (Caarls & Mazzucato, 2015), geographic movement and the confrontation with new social and gender norms, or

spouses' long separation due to restrictive migration regime, represent factors of stress which lead to increasing union instability (Boyle et al., 2008; Frank & Wildsmith, 2005).

Migration scholars examine different temporal aspects of the migration-divorce nexus. Many of them focus on women's migration after divorce. They show that migration is a way for women to reaffirm themselves not only as economic actors and responsible mothers (Tacoli, 1999), but also as desirable women and as capable to start a new life (Cole, 2014; Zurndorfer, 2018). Other scholars analyze the trajectories of married women who flee from unhappy marriages or domestic violence and obtain a *de facto* separation or a divorce (e.g., Tacoli, 1999). Chinese migrants in Japan remain legally married in China but take advantage of geographic distance to enjoy new forms of sexual liberty and engage in new relationships abroad (Liu-Farrer, 2010; Shen 2005). If migration represents a way to resist unequal gender systems, divorce from afar might be at the expense of migrant women: for instance, the Polish non-migrant husbands criticize their wife in the UK as "bad wives" and "bad mothers" and sever their links from their children (Urbańska, 2016). Some studies also document the experience of divorce during migration, while spouses are living abroad. For instance, Al-Sharmani (2017) analyzes male and female transnational resources and reasoning to petition for divorce of first- and second-generation Somali migrants in Finland. The discovery of new gender norms challenges Somali traditional and religious gender norms and leads to family tensions. The divorce experiences of binational couples are also scrutinized. While some scholars test the correlation of racial and cultural heterogamy with higher risk of marriage dissolution (Nahikari, 2016; Milewski & Kulu, 2014), others examine these couple transnational resources during divorce (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018, 2019, Sportel, 2016).

The legal issue represents another entry point to many analyses drawing on legal gaps between countries. Sportel (2016) shows how the Islamic and family laws of the Netherlands, Morocco and Egypt shape the divorce of binational couples and how spouses can either endure or play with differences. The cases of Filipino female migrants illuminate migrants' agency: they circumvent the legal interdiction of divorce in their home country and divorce abroad; some even remarry legally, even if their new matrimonial status might not be recognized in the Philippines (Constable, 2003; Lauser, 2008). Fresnoza-Flot (2018, 2019, 2021) focuses on the process of divorce of European-Filipino couples, showing how spouses navigate the laws and might succeed or renounce to take advantage of their "limping divorce".

This brief literature review shows that, interestingly, women's experiences have been more analyzed than men's. Only a few studies consider simultaneously the experiences of both groups (Tacoli, 1999; Al-Sharmani, 2017; Fresnoza-Flot, 2021) and examine women's motivations in relation with men's. The present study, therefore, aims to compare men's and women's material or symbolic constraints and resources. It also puts into perspective the situation of divorced migrants with those married in China to gain information of the meanings they attach to divorce, marriage and migration and reveals the influence of gender norms on their lives. In addition, it is evident that most studies focus on one specific social space of migrants, and often overlook the transnational dimension of their lives. In line with Al-Sharmani (2017), Urbańska (2016) and the articles in this Special Issue (Fresnoza-Flot, 2021; Gaspar, Ramos, & Ferreira, 2021; Qureshi, 2020; Sportel, 2021), this study analyzes migrants' ability to negotiate with different issues and norms and to rely simultaneously on resources located in different countries. To gain deeper understanding of the link between migration and

divorce, it adopts a global view on the process of migration by including the period before and after migration in the analysis.

### **Marriage law and social representation of divorcees in China**

Since 1949, the Communist Party had tried to produce a new society and to drastically transform family norms. Its first law in 1950 was dedicated to the family. The choice of the spouse, love-based marriage and freely consented union were enshrined as individual rights. For the first time, women could file for divorce. However, this right was under the supervision of local state agents and mainly restricted to political reasons. For decades, divorce remained rare in the cities and almost unheard of in the countryside. A new family law was adopted in 1980, and successively revised in 2001, 2003 and 2011. While the “One child policy” toughened up the Party control on the reproductive sphere, its supervision decreased over marriage and divorce (Davis, 2014), which were increasingly considered as private and personal matters. Divorce grounds were progressively enlarged to the lack of mutual affection, domestic violence and adultery (which represented important motives for the migrants met in France). The procedure was simplified: an equivalent to mutual divorce consent was introduced; employer or residents’ committee authorization were no longer necessary to divorce; the law had also a transnational dimension, giving a remote access to divorce to citizens living abroad, through Chinese consulates.

These reforms have contributed to the changing meanings associated with marriage, acknowledging that love between spouses, search for individual happiness and psychological, sentimental or sexual fulfillment should be the bases of marital bonds (Capdeville-Zeng & Ortis, 2018; Davis & Friedman, 2014; Ma et al., 2018). In the 1990s, the divorce rate increased threefold (Ma, 2018). However, in this decade, family break-ups remained rare and were perceived by the population in a rather negative way (Xu, Zhang & Xia, 2007), associated with the westernization and the individualization of society (Yan, 2009). The negative social image of divorce had led to the stigmatization of divorcees, especially women. This paper unveils the impact of such image on many Northern Chinese’s decision to “leave the country”.

### **Methods and sample**

The empirical materials come from a doctoral research on Northern Chinese men and women who had arrived in France between 1998 and 2005 as irregular migrants. This research investigated Chinese migrants’ motivations to leave China, their experiences in France and their transnational links. The ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Paris region from 2004 to 2014, was completed by a fieldwork in China in 2006 with migrants’ families and friends.

Indirect approaches – researcher working as a French language teacher and as an activist in migrant associations – and snowballing were used to establish contacts with potential respondents. Trustful relationships with respondents became possible thanks to the researcher’s good proficiency in Chinese and years spent in China. The multiplication of meetings and interviews helped reach a level of saturation (Flick 2006). In total, 90 migrants (65 women, 25 men) were interviewed; 17 of them were regularly contacted over a period of three to nine years. During fieldwork in the Paris region, participant observations and informal conversations in workplaces, dormitories, places of prostitution, flea markets and other informal settings were conducted. Repeated in-depth interviews, using a life course perspective, were adopted,

inspired by the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method that gives free voice to social actors (Wengraf and Chamberlayne 2007). During interviews, migrants reflexively elaborated about their life and migration paths, developing spontaneously some topics, while neglecting others. Semi-structured interviews focusing on specific issues completed the lacking information. All the interviews were carried out in Mandarin, formally recorded, translated, transcribed and anonymized. MaxQDA software was used to realize a thematic analysis.

The respondents in this study often spontaneously highlighted having enjoyed a rather good standard of living in communist China. They were urban citizens, and many graduated from high-school or university, which was rare in their generation. During two decades, they were employed in various sectors as skilled workers, accountants, sales people, team leaders, managers, doctors, private entrepreneurs, among others. They had married in their twenties and had one teenage child. Their low salaries were counterbalanced by benefits (housing, healthcare, education, pensions). However, the introduction of the global capitalism logic since the mid-1990s had greatly affected this comprehensive welfare system (Rocca, 2006). The shutdown of many State-owned enterprises, the sudden rise of unemployment and of urban poverty created a feeling of economic and social insecurity in this category of people, which then stirred overseas migration. It also affected families. Migrants' families had been fragilized but in a gendered way: forty-three of 65 women interviewed had divorced in China, before their departure. Six others had filed for divorce after arriving in France. In contrast, only three of 25 men respondents reported being divorced, widowed or single in China and just one had divorced after arriving in France. After a few months or years in France, almost two-thirds of women respondents (40 of 65) had remarried in France with a European man or were planning to do so (Table 1).

**Table 1. Matrimonial status of respondents**

| MATRIMONIAL STATUS                              | MALE MIGRANT | FEMALE MIGRANT | TOTAL |
|---|--------------|----------------|-------|
| Married in China                                | <b>21</b>    | 12             | 33    |
| Divorced in China                               | 1            | <b>43</b>      | 44    |
| Divorced in France                              | 1            | 6              | 7     |
| Widow   | 1            | 1              | 2     |
| Single  | 1            | 0              | 1     |
| Missing data                                    | 0            | 3              | 3     |
| Remarriage in France (or project of remarriage) | 0            | <b>40</b>      | 40    |

Nearly all the respondents have viewed a short and lone migration of three to five years as an opportunity to avoid a drop in their family living standards in China. Upon their arrival in France, they realized the huge gap between their expectations and the harsh living conditions

of undocumented Chinese migrants in Paris (Cattelain et al., 2002; Gao & Poisson, 2005). They did not speak French, did not know anybody who might support them and their tourist visa expired within few weeks. They had limited job opportunities and worked illegally for Southern Chinese families or businessmen, established earlier in France (Li, 2018; Ma Mung 2015). Most women were hired as domestic servants or unskilled workers in restaurants; men worked in construction sites, restaurants, sewing workshops or warehouses. Interviewees of both sexes complained about harsh working conditions, low wages and tense relationships with Southern Chinese employers (Lévy, 2015). They lived in constant fear of police controls and organized their daily lives around short-term risk-avoidance tactics: focusing on earning a living, avoiding any contact with non-Chinese people, delaying French language learning, etc. After a few months in France, most of them tried to obtain a residence permit at any cost.

### **Migration-divorce nexus**

Migrants talked spontaneously about the reasons of their departure and explained that they wanted to provide a good living standard to their family. At first sight, the answers of men and women respondents seem similar. But further analyses unveil nuances: first, they did not refer to the same idea of family according to their gender and matrimonial situation. Married men focused on their nuclear family - their wife and child and sometimes their parents. Women and especially those who had divorced before they moved, mostly referred to their child, their siblings and parents. Second, in their narratives, women mixed the ideas of divorce and family and did not separate their individual experiences with the couple or family members perspectives. They talked about being divorced (*lihun*), or without a family/home (*meiyou jia*).

Finally, while family tensions were mentioned rapidly by men, the issue of divorce was developed extensively in women's non-structured interviews, revealing a major concern. Years after the divorce, many of them could not hold back their tears as they recounted what they considered as dramatic failure: "I still consider the word 'divorce' as a loss of face" explained Mrs. Di, 44-year-old, who used to be a manager in big cereal company in China. All respondents agreed that being a middle-aged divorced woman is equal to accumulating all kinds of constraint in China. They believed that women divorcees have no real prospect to alleviate their situation and/or to remarry well in China. Gender and age are at play in this situation, and men do not face the same constraints as indicates the remarriage of many respondents' ex-husbands. Divorce status, combined with other social markers, such as age, social class and gender, pushed these women into what they described as a "dead-end situation" before their migration. Nearly all the women still consider divorce as a major turning point in their life. It is a greater milestone than their migration, which they rather regard as a consequence of the family dissolution.

### ***Migration as a consequence of divorce***

Most women interviewees highlighted a causal relationship between their divorce and their decision to migrate. The short time gap of few months between divorce and departure endorses this correlation. Migration was imagined as a way to ease different types of material and symbolic burden accumulated after their divorce.

First, economic concern was present in many discourses. Divorced women explained having to cope with a critical economic step back as they could no longer rely on their ex-spouse earning. They highlighted that in the 1990s, couples usually tried to limit their expenses to the

amount of one salary and spared the second to build up savings to cope with life's hazards. The drastic increase of the cost of education and health care (Rocca, 2006) triggered their feeling of becoming poor or for the wealthier of a drop in their living standards. Mrs. Zhang, who used to enjoy a comfortable standard of living as private entrepreneur in Qingdao, felt suddenly deprived. "At the time, I ended up with nothing! I had absolutely nothing left! [...] I would never have imagined that I would end up one day with nothing!" Her divorce had opened a vicious cycle: the factory that she ran with her husband was shut down. She had to look for a job and was hired as an ordinary worker in the sewing factory where she began her career, which represented an economic but also a symbolic step backwards; her husband never paid back his debt and they had to continue to live in the same house, as none of them had enough money to move away.

Like her, other women interviewees recalled being afraid that the separation would have an impact on their professional career. Their positions were often related with their husband: some worked with him, others got their job through his social network and were afraid to have less economic opportunities or to be fired after the separation. This connection between the private and the professional spheres increased their feeling of insecurity. These women on their forties, also explained being too young to resign themselves to a precarious situation. Migration was a way to find new earning opportunities and to resist a drop in their living standards after the divorce. Migration appears here stemming from the intersection of women's economic situation, age and divorce status.

Second, divorce has increased migrant mother's anxiety for their only child. Unlike their male counterparts who were less worried about their offspring's future, women migrants often highlighted having migrated for the sake of their child (Lévy, 2016). Mrs. Yu, a sex worker in Paris, was sending an average of 2,000 euros a year to cover her daughter's university fees. She recalled her dilemma before asking for divorce from her violent and gambling husband:

If I had asked for divorce, I would not have been able to afford our daily charges [with her low salary of ordinary worker]. I would not have had any place to live [the family house was the property of her husband]. If I had asked my daughter's custody, my earnings would not have been enough to pay school fees. If I had not left the country, my daughter would not have had the chance to go to university. [...] In France, the situation is much better than in China. From the economic point of view, I can send my daughter to university. For me, it's the most important problem, and I have solved it. That's my greatest success! [If I had stayed in China], I wouldn't have the economic capacity [to do it]!

A symbolic dimension was at stake: these women had battled to retain legal custody of their child and could not accept that economic restrictions would hamper their child's well-being and educational opportunities or narrowed his/her opportunities in life. "In China, parents sacrifice themselves for their kids" stated Mrs. Zhang, who was longing for her 14-year-old daughter. The respondents did not consider their separation from their teenage children during many years as a paradox. They never employed the negative term "left behind children" (*liushou ertong*) that is used in China to describe the situation of children of internal migrants. On the contrary, they viewed migration as a way to fulfil their parental duty: it enabled them to earn enough



money to ensure their child's economic future, to pay education fees or a bribery to enroll in a good university, to obtain a stable job or to buy an apartment (a decisive asset for the marriage of young men).

Women migrants' emphasis on their sense of maternal "responsibilities, *zeren*" should also be understood as an attempt to minimize the impact of their divorce on their offspring. In China in the 1990s, as in Europe, there was a public concern for the fate of the children of divorced couples (Xu, Zhang & Xia, 2007). Many migrant women expressed their apprehension that the breakup could have "destabilized their child"; to protect him, some parents chose to hide his divorce. In a sense, the women interviewed seemed more concerned to compensate the consequences of divorce than those of long-term separation due to migration. Their remittances were less dedicated to offset their absence with transnational practices of commodification of love (Parreñas, 2001), but rather to counterbalance their lower economic capacities as divorcees and head of a single-parent family.

While women respondents presented their migration as dedicated to their child, we have to keep in mind that their decision to go abroad represented a compromise: a way to balance their personal decision to divorce with their child's well-being. This type of migration explanations focusing on family benefit while personal expectations are not mentioned, resonate with those of Filipino women in Italy (Tacoli, 1999). While divorced women have challenged gender norms, their migration explanations could be understood as an attempt to downplay their resistance to dominant norms in China and finally conform from abroad with maternal altruistic roles. It illustrates how the imbrication of divorce, economic power and gendered parental norms might trigger migration.

Third, the stigmatization of middle-aged divorced mothers in China was another source of distress emerging from women's discourses. Unwittingly, they had embodied a new social figure at the turn of the century. Until then, there were very few unmarried women living alone, with the exception of widows. Mrs. Hong, a former bank employee who divorced in 1986, recounted with irony: "I became famous in my company! I remember that, at any time, workers would open the door of my office to stare at me; they would come and look at 'the divorced woman'!" The transgression of traditional distribution of power between the sexes was all the more important as most of the women respondents had initiated the divorce, while in many cases their husbands had tried to bar the procedure. These women have called into question the family institution. This major pillar of Chinese traditional culture is often depicted as a place of unity and solidarity where the collective interest has to prevail over the individual interest of each family member (Capdeville-Zeng & Ortis, 2018; Yan, 2009). Women are expected to preserve family unity at any cost (Xu et al., 2007), as the often-cited proverb illustrates: "marry a chicken, follow a chicken; marry a dog, follow a dog". Rather than facing social disapproval, some couples chose to keep secret the information of their legal divorce from their neighbors, colleagues and even parents and child; they continued life as usual and shared the same apartment until the ex-wife decided to leave the country. Mrs. Li, home cleaner in France, considered that it would be a shame if people knew her divorcee's status and that she would no more be able to carry out her work of executive in a public company.

On the other hand, these mothers had retained the custody of their child. This decision went against traditional Chinese representations which consider that children belong to the paternal family, as well as most judicial decisions, which granted the custody to the father (Xu, Zhang

& Xia, 2007). In 1994, when the first respondents asked for divorce, single-parent families accounted for 2.5% of all Chinese households (Xu, Zhang & Xia, 2007). Becoming the head of a single-parent family set them further apart from traditional patterns. “In China, if you are not married, and you have a child, people will laugh at you! They will not respect you. You are not a serious person... It’s really bad” stated Mrs. Yu, an ordinary worker.

With their decision to file for divorce, these women had violated the dominant social norms in their middle-class and age group. Material or symbolic consequences challenged their family living standard, their child wellbeing and future, as well as their personal reputation. This marital status had put at stake simultaneously their professional, economic and social inclusion. For the first time in their lives, they were confronted with a form of social disaffiliation (Castel, 1995). They had regarded migration as a way to escape from the vulnerable position of outsiders in China. It was more directed to alleviate a blockage in China than to an imagined future in the destination country. Their logics show how gender, age, class, marital status and migration intersect with the power of traditional gender norms which have in a certain way pushed these lower middle class, 40 years-old divorced women abroad.

### ***Migration thanks to divorce***

The relationship between the past reasons that pushed migrants to leave their country, and their aspirations for a future in a new place, is more complex for a few Chinese women respondents. They emphasized having migrated thanks to their new status of divorcee. For Mrs. Xu, an ex-accountant of 41-year-old member of a wealthy family, the separation has transformed her life perspective:

Before, I didn’t have the opportunity to go abroad, I hadn’t divorced. Finally, I had the ideas of someone with a family. It was not possible that both of us [her husband and her] go out. Then, I was by myself, alone, nothing matters. Wherever I go, it would be my place.

Other women, who had suffered from their husband’s infidelity, stressed their desire to close this chapter of their life and move on in a new context and in a new country. They went abroad to build “the second part of their lives”, as explained Mrs. Xie who used to run a sewing shop. Mrs. Lu, an ex-businesswoman had associated China with the place of her ex-husband’s unfaithfulness and stressed that she “never, ever, wants to go back to China”. For these women, divorce represented a positive turning point: it has given them access to a new form of personal liberty. From an empirical as well as a symbolic point of view, it has alleviated their previous familial and geographic anchorage and made it easier to venture out of the country.

### ***Migration to get divorce***

Almost half of Northern Chinese respondents were still married in China when they arrived in France (43 male and female respondents of 90). Nonetheless, except for a few interviewees who never mentioned any critical conflicts with their spouse in China, most married respondents reported important conjugal or family tensions. They also revealed that these concerns have played a major role in their decision to migrate and in their strategies in France.

Some women respondents clearly pointed out that they had divorced thanks to their migration. Mrs. He, a factory worker, who then worked as prostitute in Paris, explained that she had left China to leave her intrusive mother-in-law and her violent husband who had always refused to divorce:

In China, I did not have any way out. I did not have any choice; I could not do anything else but to go abroad. [...] Why? Look, [my husband] hadn't agreed to divorce. I was not able to divorce. If I had left the house without being divorced, he would have come to poison me! [...] Most of the other Chinese women are like me. They left the country after the divorce or without having divorced. We all thought that life could not go on like that. [We thought]: 'I leave, I choose to escape from this family. I run away from the marriage, from the family, from the problems!'

These women have taken advantage of geographic distance to protect themselves against their spouse and to force him to comply with their will to divorce. These cases echo studies emphasizing migration as a way for vulnerable people and especially women or sexual minorities to resist oppressive gender systems (Constable, 2003; Urbańska, 2016). Migration is here an “exit” option, according to Hirshman’s triad (1970), which highlights that defection is chosen when actors judge that they can neither accept the situation nor negotiate any compromise. These cases illustrate another gendered aspect of the relationship between migration and divorce.

### ***Migration to avoid divorce***

At first sight, men respondents were not facing the same family issues. Unlike their women counterparts, 21 out of 25 respondents were still married when they went abroad, and just one of them had applied for divorce after his arrival in France. They never spontaneously raised the issue of divorce during interviews or informal conversations. On the contrary they emphasized having “left China for the family”, “in order to support the family, *yangjia*” and to send money in China.

However, the case of Mr. Guo, followed for three years, made me realize that many men’s migrations were also related to a certain point to the concern of family preservation and the issue of divorce. It unveiled another aspect of the combination of social class, gender, age and marital status in China, and how migration have represented for some men a solution to conjugal tensions. This informal cook in a Chinese restaurant in Paris was fired after ten years and left without income overnight. His undocumented status, his age (55) and his back pain hampered his search for a new job. No longer being able to send money to his family was a source of major distress. He explained that since he had stopped sending remittances to China, more than two years ago, his wife had refused to answer his phone calls. Actually, tensions had already emerged before he left China – after he was laid-off from his job while she kept hers – and that was the main cause for his migration.

My wife thought she was stronger than me. She looked down on me. She said that I am a man who is unable to support his wife; that everyone else is more powerful than

me. [...] If I left the country, it was related to the family. It was in order to provide them with good living conditions. But it was also a way to flee, to escape.

His health worsened as months passed by without finding a job in France. He felt desperate:

If I go back to China, and if I don't earn money, my wife will refuse to live with me. [...] I have nothing left: neither a family, nor the money I earned [in France]. I gave her all the money. I have nothing left at all.

His narratives shed light on the central place of economic power in organizing gender roles and power relations between spouses in family. It also revealed the role of migration as a way to comply with social expectations relying on men. Mr. Guo stressed that his situation was not exceptional: "most of the people who go abroad have family problems. If spouses had got along, no matter how difficult it was, they wouldn't have thought to leave the country".

This borderline case encouraged me to reexamine other male migrant trajectories and to confront their testimonies with those of female interviewees. Divorced women expressed harsh criticisms against their ex-husband for not "bringing money back home", being "unable to feed the family". Mrs. Li showed her contempt for her ex-husband, a laid-off engineer who refused lower-skilled jobs and remained unemployed for several years:

He stayed home and did the cooking and laundry. I was supporting him. So, it was as if I was spending money to hire him as a maid. He didn't assume his family responsibilities! He's not a man! He is really below everything!

Beyond their ex-spouse financial capacity alone, women respondents called his masculinity into question, explaining that he was "without competence" or "not a man enough". These discourses revealed that middle-aged unemployed men had run the risk of harsh disqualification in China, especially if their wives kept their job and had to support the family with their own wages. This situation had been regarded as a reversal of gender roles and had impacted the power relation within families, as explained Mrs. Zhang, a former private entrepreneur:

Now the situation is reversed: men earn less money, women earn more. Nowadays, it is the men who stay at home; women go out to earn money. [...] At home, the woman's word is what counts; in the family, the situation has been reversed: he is the one who must serve and take care of the child, of the wife; he has to cook, do the laundry and clean the household. Because men don't work.

Most of the men respondents reported being laid-off and having no job long before they decided to "leave China for the family". One can wonder if this expression has not to be taken at face value: whether they have not also left to preserve the family and avoid a divorce.

Data from observations show that husbands tried hard to meet their wife's expectations and to take on the role of the main family breadwinner from afar. Mr. Huang, who used to be unemployed in China and worked as a construction worker in France stressed leading an impoverished day-to-day existence, spending the bare minimum to send remittances. He explained planning to "stay and work in France until I can't move anymore, until I die" and

considered that long separation between spouses was not a problem, “as long as I am able to send money back home”. Mr. Sun, an ex-truck driver regarded his migration as quite successful, even if he became a ragman scavenging in Parisian dustbins for goods that he sold at flea markets. After years of unemployment in China relying on his wife’s wages, he explained “we have shared the roles”: she became housewife, while he earned money abroad.

For these men who could not meet gender expectations around father-husband role in China, migration has provided them the opportunity to become the sole family breadwinner. This transnational family arrangement had preserved men’s legitimacy within the family. It also placed them in a stronger negotiating position with their spouse. Thus, Mr. Sun forced his wife to accept his decision to live in France with another Chinese woman. If very few male migrants have divorced in China, a dominant model of masculinity and a shared but inaccessible definition of what a “good husband” should do, underlied their mobility incentives. Migration has enlarged their resources, which enabled them to repair their weakened image in the eyes of their family members and to avoid the risk of break-up. The comparison of men’s and women’s discourses revealed an underlying relation linking economic power with dominant masculinity and femininity models, gender power relations, family models to divorce and finally to migration.

### *Divorce to secure migration*

After a few months or years in France, unlike their men counterparts, two-third of the women respondents expressed their desire to remarry with a French man. Even many married women whose husband lived in China were interested in this option. This choice appeared to be a sudden volte-face for most interviewees, who had during previous interviews clearly stated that they did not plan to remarry abroad, especially with a non-Chinese partner. All explained having changed their mind “because they had no choice” and had “to adapt to their situation in France”. They described their decision as “realistic”, or “pragmatic”. In other words, they directly connected the issue of remarriage to the migration process, and especially to the legal issue of regularization of their migration status. “The only way to get a legal document is to marry here!” affirmed Mrs. Yang an ex-saleswoman who suffered from labor exploitation as domestic worker and longed for a residence permit. Like almost all the other respondents, she did not correspond to any legal criteria that would enable her to apply for regularization. In this legal dead-end situation, the information that the French law grants a resident permit to the spouse of European citizen had rapidly spread among migrants. Many women viewed it as some light at the end of the tunnel and a way to fix their legal status. After the celebration of her friend’s marriage, Mrs. Chu explained bitterly:

I am stupid, I should have married with an old man as soon as I arrived and get documents. But I didn’t think about it. [...] At least now my friend can go out on the street without being afraid. I don’t go out anymore. When she will get her papers, she will be able to work. She will finally be able to send money home. You see, these documents, it’s really important. Without papers, we can do nothing!

Thus, for migrant women, marriage would open up new perspectives. For example, Mrs. Ding, an informal worker in a sewing factory, planned to learn French, to open her own shop

and to apply for family reunification for her daughter. In women interviewees' perspective, matrimonial issue is deeply intertwined with legal, economic, personal security concern. It is also a way to complete their parental duty from afar. The realization of such a matrimonial plan appeared to the respondents as quite feasible. Marriage agencies or already remarried Chinese women proposed to introduce them to French men from a working class or lower middle class on their 50s to 70s.

Despite their good relationship with their husband in China, some married women were ready to divorce there to be able to remarry in France. To obtain her husband agreement, Mrs. Zhou, a former retailer in Qingdao, reported having explained to him that it was a "fake marriage, *jia jiehun*", just an administrative procedure to get legal documents. By getting a better job she could accumulate rapidly earnings and "go back home more quickly". Respondents like Mrs. Zhou presented divorce and remarriage as formal acts, a compromise to circumvent French migration law. Paradoxically for these women to build a new family represented a way to remain faithful to their previous family in China. Interestingly, a few married women carried out their project of divorce followed by a remarriage. If they managed to send remittances to China, they were also quite dedicated to their new French husband. Mrs. Di joked around explaining that "it is as if I am bigamous". Indeed, while she left China because of her divorce and had remarried in France, she has then reconciled with her ex-husband and they live together each time she goes back to China for holidays. The rest of the year, she shared her life with her French husband.

## **Conclusion**

By analyzing the discourses and practices of Northern Chinese migrant men and women in Paris who are married or divorced migrants (before or after their departure), this paper proposes an encompassing perspective of the imbrication of divorce and migration, showing that divorce and family norms in China or France are keys to understand transnational migration. Marital breakdown or family preservation are present in the migration motivations of both divorced and still married migrants. Thus, in the cases observed, divorce might lead to migration and vice versa.

The situation of respondents is diverse: if most of them pointed out a correlation between their divorce and migration, the relationship between these two events is complex and might evolve over time. It develops along a continuum: on the one hand, most of the women respondents explained having decided to leave their country because of their divorce; others stressed that they migrated to achieve a divorce; a minority of women emphasized having gained access to mobility thanks to their status of divorcee. On the other hand, nearly all men respondents chose to move abroad to avoid family tensions and preserve their family from divorce. Finally, after few months in France, many women considered that a remarriage abroad would make life easier and some married women chose to divorce in China and remarry in France to secure their stay abroad; in other words, they divorced because of their migration.

The meaning associated to the correlation between the two events is different according to migrants' situation and subjectivity; they associated it with a negative or a positive value: for some women migration was an adverse consequence of the break-up, on the contrary, for others it represented a fortunate outcome, or a facilitator factor of the migration process; for men mobility was an opportunity to shun divorce. Individual's migration plan, that spans across

geographic borders and evolves over time, provides important information highlighting if (s)he is mostly focused on past experiences or projected him/herself into the future, in China and/or France. For some women, past status of female divorcees in China was a decider in leaving the country; for others the aversion of the undocumented migration status in France pushed them to divorce. On the contrary, the projection into the future characterized men respondents' motivations, who wanted to fulfill from afar the role of good father and husband in China; it was also decisive to understand the choice of women who wanted to build the "second part of their lives" in France.

An intersectional analysis provides a deeper understanding in migrants' reasoning. Many middle age divorced women who had become head of a single-parent family regarded migration as an innovative solution to resist a drop in their living standards following their divorce. Besides their role of mother and their altruist preoccupation for their child, their concerns were also related to their own reputation in China. They had applied for divorce and challenged the traditional distribution of power between the sexes and they tried to take advantage of the geographic distance to protect themselves from social stigmatization. They handle at the transnational level the marginality and exclusion associated with their divorcee's status. Migration also represented a sesame for women in their 40s, who felt too young to resign themselves, to open up new perspectives and to imagine a future abroad. Migration incentive appears stemming from the intersection of women's age, economic situation, parental obligation and divorce status. For married women who decided to divorce to remarry in France and get access to legal document, these categories of difference combine with the legal issue and migration status. The situations of most men respondents illuminate another intersection of economic, gender, age, marital status and migration. Geographic mobility was their way to flee conjugal tensions, but their main aim was not to obtain a divorce but to preserve family unity, while sending remittances. They became able to fulfill the role of family main breadwinner and to recover a form of valorized masculinity; but these social expectations in China have also reduced their leeway in France.

Finally, the Northern Chinese respondents followed during ten years had not radically challenged Chinese family norms; instead, migration represented a way to find resources to fulfill what they regarded as obligations in China. While they conformed to these gendered norms, they also reaffirmed their legitimacy. These situations illustrate how traditional Chinese gender norms of family traverse the frontiers and continue to shape in the long run the experiences of married men migrants as well as divorced or remarried women in France. Their trajectories connect the macro level to the micro level, even to the very intimate sphere, as these migrants have grabbed global resources to deal with very private issues.

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