

# A South-South Cross-Border Marriage Between Chinese Men and Ethiopian Women

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## Abstract

This article develops an ideal type of South-South cross-border marriage. Based on an eight-month multi-sited ethnography in Ethiopia and China, I identified an unusual conjuncture of global forces, connections, and imaginations that facilitated cross-border marriages between Chinese men and local women in Ethiopia, which should be considered a novel ideal type. Its theoretical novelty is not only defined by the unique dynamics among Sino-Ethiopian spouses vis-à-vis the “segregated” Chinese documented in existing studies but also by these marriages’ distinct formation mechanisms. Sino-Ethiopian marriage is not formed due to China being an attractive destination but is associated with China’s incompatible hard and soft power as forces, Chinese factories and accumulated Sino-Ethiopian social networks in local communities as connections, and localized imaginations. Furthermore, this study calls for a paradigm shift in examining cross-border marriages between a developing South and a rising South in this dramatically changing global capitalist world system.

Keywords: cross-border marriage, China in Africa, global China, South-South

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of “China in Africa” is frequently reported by media and scholars with foci that remain primarily at the macro level with specific interests in the quantified economic facets (Siu and McGovern, 2017). Only a few studies have reported Afro-Chinese intimate relationships (see, for example, French, 2014; Driessen, 2019). Furthermore, Miriam Driessen (2019) found that Chinese men established intimate relationships with local Ethiopian women among Chinese road construction sites in the Tigray region (northern Ethiopia). However, she also found that Chinese managers tended to pull their compatriots back on track via a racial-distancing process to preserve the purity of Chinese identity. Those Chinese who “trespassed” the racial boundary were at risk of being transferred to other positions or sent back to China. Such Afro-Chinese dynamics presented in Driessen’s work fit the broader literature on Chinese in Africa. Most Chinese maintained a working relationship with local Africans and no more, which gave little opportunity for Afro-Chinese marriage to emerge (Lee, 2017; Yan et al., 2019).

Understandably, Afro-Chinese marriage in an African country has been underreported and thus understudied. Most research on Afro-Chinese marriages has been conducted in Guangzhou, China, where African male traders married Chinese women (Lan, 2017; Mathews et al., 2017; Jordan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). These African men came to China for their academic or business aspirations and later met their Chinese wives.

This study focuses on a rare case of Afro-Chinese cross-border marriage that occurred in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, and its neighboring areas. The spouses formed their families through socially recognized weddings or legal registrations, distinct from the image of isolated Chinese who disconnect from the local community. How were these Sino-Ethiopian marriages formed, and why were their dynamics so different? Solely employing a “cultural” (see Wang, 2014) or “racial” (see Driessen, 2019) lens cannot answer the puzzles above. These marriages should not be regarded as the products of encounters between “Chineseness” and “Ethiopianness.” Instead, I explain these marriages through global China’s expansion in Ethiopia, which facilitated and shaped the marriage formation in a specific time-space. Besides, I explore how global China’s power was negotiated and challenged by the spouses, constantly regarding the West.

To use Charles Ragin’s (1987) dichotomy, I adopt a case-oriented approach in this study rather than a variable-oriented one, through which “[r]esearchers examine cases as wholes, not as collections of variables” for uncovering “the variety of meaningful patterns of causes and effects” (52). Therefore, Sino-Ethiopian marriage is regarded as a theoretical case or an ideal type (Weber, 2012) that was caused by a conjecture of different variables. The relevant variables, including class, racial concepts, and gender, are considered with a changing world system (Wallerstein, 1979) disrupted by the emergence of global China. The “wholeness” of this case is achieved through the analytical tool of the “three axes,” namely global forces,

connections, and imaginations, as formulated by Michael Burawoy (2000), which emphasize the interconnections between a microsite and its macro extensions when we contemplate globalization phenomena. This paper therefore follows the “extended case method tradition” (Burawoy, 1991). It analyzes China’s presence in Ethiopia, not separately as a contextual background but with the specific connections it produced and its symbolic power to the spouses. Likewise, the imaginations of the spouses are regarded not merely as the individuals’ agency but as agentive responses toward the macrostructures. Through the “three axes,” this analytical tool serves a comparative purpose in conceptualizing and comparing the formation process of cross-border marriages in the existing literature and in this paper.

### THEORIZING THE UNIQUENESS OF SINO-ETHIOPIAN CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGE

Most studies of cross-border marriage are variable-oriented, and their scholarship has been dominantly micro-focused with highly descriptive and vaguely defined conceptual tools. For instance, Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar (2001) argue that cross-border marriage is influenced by the spouses’ “social locations” created through specific “socially stratifying factors” (445-446). Nicole Constable claims that cross-border marriages were established within various “marriage-scapes” (2005b). These landscapes of cross-border marriages are shaped by specific cultural, social, historical, and political-economic conditions, which determine who marries whom, through what means, and with what incentives. Not entirely excluding the structures – such as global capitalism, former colonial connections, and existing migration flow – these concepts fail to provide a causal framework to explain how certain structures affect individuals’ exertions of agency and why agents act in accordance with or against the structures.

Influenced in one way or another by these concepts, scholars on cross-border marriage often enter specific sites to explore the grounded experiences of the spouses (as exemplified by these two volumes of collected essays: Constable, 2005a; Yang and Lu, 2010). Instead of focusing on the interconnections between structures and marital practices, these studies present the agency of spouses and their family members. In doing so, structures often retreat as a background without questioning how these structures are produced and how they reproduce certain marriages and affect motivations.

### ESTABLISHING IDEAL TYPES WITH THE “THREE AXES”

In this paper, I consider Sino-Ethiopian cross-border marriage and the cross-border marriage documented in previous studies as two different ideal types. The former is a South-South type, and the latter is a South-North type, as outlined in Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory (1979). This dichotomy does not suggest a unified set of configurations within each ideal type or exclude other

types in the real world. Rather, I use existing literature on cross-border marriage as metadata to draw a comparison – as a theoretical type – with the Sino-Ethiopian marriage discussed in this paper.

### *South-North cross-border marriage*

Global North countries are the major destinations and constitutive of global forces affecting cross-border marriage. Scholars have observed a feminized cross-border marriage flow in which women from less-developed Asian, Latin American, and Eastern European countries married men in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and developed East Asia (Constable, 2005b). Besides the push-pull incentives, cross-border marriage formation also depends on local and transnational “marriage-scapes” (Constable, 2005b). Although marriage migration flows from the Global South countries to the Global North remind us that the core-periphery world system (Wallerstein, 1979) still applies globally, the assumption of cross-border marriage being hypergamous socioeconomically is misleading (hypergamy refers to the migration destination’s socioeconomic and symbolic power). For instance, Russian and Filipina women marry men from America and Japan for both material and nonmaterial desires (Faier, 2007; Suzuki, 2007; Patico, 2009). Also, scholars use transnationalism to conceptualize cross-border marriage (Williams, 2010). Through the three transnational social spaces – kinship groups, transnational circuits, and transnational communities (Faist, 2000), women cross borders to marry men with similar cultural roots or ethnicities (Constable, 2003; Charsley, 2013). But these marriage migration flows are still from the Global South to the Global North, reminiscent of the global hypergamy of locations.

Shaped by the world system, two primary connections link prospective spouses. Among the population with transnational ties, family networks are naturally their means to marry across borders (Thai, 2005; Charsley, 2013). Where this does not apply, the profit-driven brokerages and the governmental regulations compose an institutionalized marriage market globally (Park, 1996). Both connections play multiple roles in facilitating marriage migration flows and sustaining the connections themselves. For instance, Singaporean marriage agencies profit from the business niche by promoting the country as an attractive option. Through various “discursive strategies,” agents present Singaporean men and Vietnamese migrant women as ideal marriage partners by “reconstituting” these marginalized men and women as “busy working men” and “humble, hardworking, and caring spouses” (Yeoh et al., 2017: 237-238).

According to previous research, global imaginations among cross-border marriages usually compound pragmatic expectations with immaterial desires that were primarily reproduced by the current global order through promotions and repackaging by global connections. Men from the Global North seek to marry Global South women to fulfill their reproductive needs and cultural obligations (Liaw et al., 2010; Yang and Schoonheim, 2010; Statham, 2020). They also fantasize about their

potential foreign spouses being “traditional” with family-oriented values (Constable, 2005b; Thai, 2005; Statham, 2020) or as being the exotic “others” (Manderson and Jolly, 1997). Economic betterment is critical for women from the Global South, especially when cross-border marriage is a family strategy (Williams, 2010). But these women’s agency also goes beyond the material calculations. They may expect to escape from their patriarchal home countries (Constable, 2005b; Thai, 2005) and wish to attain citizenship connecting them with cosmopolitanism and modernity (Faier, 2007). Also, these considerations do not necessarily preclude love and other forms of intimacy (Freeman, 2005; Patico, 2009).

### *South-South cross-border marriage*

Hardly any of the previous studies reflect what I observed in Ethiopia. China emerged as a global power less than two decades ago. Despite its rising economic power, the attractiveness associated with soft power needs time to accumulate. Whether China has attained a similar level of desirability to become a marriage migration destination is in question. Besides, there is no transnational family tie between China and Ethiopia to serve as global connections. International marriage brokerage is banned in China and generally does not exist in Ethiopia, where the thriving agencies are for labor migration (Adugna, 2019). I also found that the imaginations of Sino-Ethiopian spouses were diverse and complicated, as also reflected in the existing studies. However, migration to China was irrelevant to those Ethiopian wives. I met no Ethiopian during my fieldwork who thought China was an ideal destination to reside in. So, the case of Sino-Ethiopian marriage is theoretically different from the cross-border marriages documented in previous studies, as the marriage formation mechanisms diverge. Therefore, the case of Sino-Ethiopian marriage requires a new theorization.

## AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF SINO-ETHIOPIAN CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGE

From 2018 to 2020, I conducted an eight-month ethnographic fieldwork stint in both Ethiopia and China. The pilot study took place during one month in 2018. With the network I built and the social media apps, I maintained and expanded my connections among Sino-Ethiopian couples. In 2019, I spent half a year on the subsequent fieldwork in Addis Ababa and its surrounding areas. During early 2020, I conducted a follow-up study across China, visiting several families after they had moved to China.

I collected data through formal and informal interviews and participant observation. I interviewed 14 Chinese husbands and 15 Ethiopian wives (N=29). Besides, I interviewed the Ethiopian parents of several of these couples while visiting their natal families. I conducted the interviews with Chinese men in Chinese, while the interviews with Ethiopians were conducted in Amharic, except for two Ethiopian wives who used mainly English during the interviews. I audiotaped and transcribed

verbatim all 45 in-depth interviews (I interviewed several spouses more than once). I sought informed consent before each interview. Furthermore, I conducted the participant observation mainly during home visits, family dinners, parties, and other social gatherings. I wrote extensive field notes and subsequently analyzed the data thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

I sourced the interlocutors through a snowball sampling with an active membership. The Sino-Ethiopian spouses gradually acknowledged me as a jack-of-all-trades in the community. Besides being a researcher, I was a translator, a consultant for family on legal and financial issues, a wedding organizer, and the best man at a wedding. I was with the Sino-Ethiopian couples when they were fighting, negotiating dowry, marrying, and navigating different governmental institutions for travel documents. The reciprocal relationship between me and the Sino-Ethiopian spouses made it easy for them to open up to me and refer me to further interlocutors.

Also, given the complex configurations of the research participants, my positionality was carefully balanced throughout the fieldwork. I am an ethnic Han Chinese man from Southwestern China. Through shared gender, ethnicity, and language, I naturally picked the quickest and perhaps easiest way to enter the field through Chinese husbands. The rapport between us was built through a choreography of working-class masculinity, including but not limited to binge drinking and smoking, and talking loudly. However, I had to control the level of masculine bonding as such scenarios combined what the Ethiopians disliked the most. Furthermore, I did not want to be fixed with these Chinese men, especially being one of them. Studying marriages will inevitably reach the most private parts of people's life experiences, which requires trust and closeness. I gained Ethiopian wives' trust as an understanding outsider who cared about the women's experiences and opinions without potential conflict of interest. When helping them with their travel documents, I had deep conversations with them and only about the women themselves. I am not sure if I succeeded in winning every wife's trust. But there were some moments I could feel I made it. One Ethiopian wife told me, "You know, you are the only Chinese man who cares about us. You ask how we feel."

Most interlocutors (27 out of 29) are from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds, which resembles the general configuration of Sino-Ethiopian spouses. The Chinese husbands are often from rural areas or small townships and received a limited education. Many found themselves unvalued in the domestic marriage market. The Ethiopian wives are primarily from rural and other underprivileged backgrounds too. Compared to their husbands, these women usually received higher education and were much younger than their husbands. They married at a very young age, several of whom were under 18 when their weddings were held. For the samples' diversity, I interviewed a Chinese husband and an Ethiopian wife with higher socioeconomic status from two different families, which was used to examine whether China was better known and thus more attractive to spouses of higher class. They, of course, had a courtship and marriage distinct from other Sino-Ethiopian

spouses in this study. However, persuading their wives to move to China was still difficult and under negotiation when the data was collected.

## HOW CHINESE MIGRANT MEN MARRY ETHIOPIAN WOMEN

The path of how Chinese men marry local women is distinct from what has been reported by previous studies. Like the conceptualization of existing literature, I also present marriage formation through the “three axes”: global force, global connection, and global imagination.

### *Global force: China is visible in Ethiopia, but not loveable*

“Look! You Chinese people built that.” A taxi driver pointed at a skyscraper under construction. “You know, Chinese are everywhere. They work very fast. If for us to build, God knows how long it takes!” The 206-meter building is the new landmark of Addis Ababa. It is said to be the tallest building not only in Ethiopia but in East Africa.

If we only look at the economic statistics, China is powerful in Ethiopia. China’s investment in Ethiopia in the recent 20 years has contributed to Ethiopia’s economic takeoff. Since 2004, Ethiopia has maintained 8% or above gross domestic product (GDP) growth (IMF, 2018) until COVID-19 and the civil war began in 2020. Adopting a developmentalist approach, Ethiopia has become the powerhouse of the East African economy (Oqubay, 2015). This eastern African country has often been portrayed as “the next China” or “China’s China” with extensive Chinese official financial support and foreign direct investment (FDI) (Chakrabarty, 2016; Nicholas, 2017). China’s state investment and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) focus on infrastructure, while China’s private FDI concentrates on manufacturing (Chakrabarty, 2016). Infrastructure building and industrialization have boosted urbanization in Ethiopia (Fitawok et al., 2020). Besides, job vacancies created by the manufacturing and service industry have led to internal rural-urban migration, which involved many of my Ethiopian interlocutors.

During the same period, numerous Chinese employees came with construction projects and replanted factories. Many of them are men who found themselves uncompetitive in China’s domestic marriage market due to the marriage squeeze (Muhsam, 1974). Therefore, China’s expansion in Ethiopia has created meeting opportunities for potential Sino-Ethiopian spouses.

However, China’s presence and influences were time-space specific. As I found in Ethiopia, China’s visibility was limited to the newly developed urban districts, infrastructure construction sites, industrial zones, and Chinese restaurants. Leaving Bole International Airport, numerous billboards of China’s construction companies stood along the road. In the most developed areas of Addis Ababa, huge logos with Chinese characters are hung on unfinished buildings. But when I walked to the old town, such as Piazza or Kazanchis, China’s symbols almost disappeared. They were

replaced by Coca-Cola or HBO, which reminded Ethiopians of the final season of *Game of Thrones*.

Ethiopians were after the West. Kaleman is a local taxi driver hired by Lu when we applied for Christina's (Lu's wife) immigration documents. He is a university graduate who can speak four different languages. He was applying to work for the US embassy at the time and said:

Honestly, the pay is not that tempting. I earn more driving this taxi. But if I get the job, maybe after six or seven years, my whole family will have the chance to move to the US. We will have US nationality.

The West was also the source of fights between Sino-Ethiopian spouses, especially when Chinese husbands persuaded their wives to move to China. For instance, Zhu's wife Anny always responded with references to America whenever Zhu, my Chinese gatekeeper, brought up how modern and developed China was.

Zhu: She always mentions America. Like last night, she trashed me, "What is good about your China? I'd rather go to America. Even just mopping floors or cleaning toilets. They have a minimum wage of 30 or 40 dollars an hour. I work eight hours a day. I can live a good life!"

Anny: He told me that China is developed. They have everything. They are modern. He always compares [China] with my country. ALL THE TIME! And I told him, "Don't compare them. It's [Ethiopia] in Africa. China is a big country. Why don't you compare it with a big country?"

Western countries are the migration destinations when Ethiopian women marry foreign men. Cross-border marriages in Ethiopia are mainly formed through transnational ties between the local and diasporic communities (Adugna, 2019). The attraction of these Global North countries is usually built on more than its economic development (Thai, 2005; Faier, 2007; Suzuki, 2007; Patico, 2009) but connects to countries' "soft co-optive power" (Nye, 1990).

China's leaders, including Xi Jinping, are fully aware that China is yet to become "loveable" (Myers and Bradsher, 2021). The government is keen on promoting China's soft power, which is expected to make China more desired. The establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) worldwide started in 2004 and is regarded as one such endeavor (Zhou and Luk, 2016). However, Maria Repnikova (2022) found that many students attended CIs in Addis Ababa only for "China's tangible offerings" and went to learn the Chinese language "to secure employment" (54). Their efforts were made for future job opportunities offered by Chinese enterprises in Ethiopia instead of their passion for Chinese culture.



Like these CIs' students, the Ethiopian wives did not find China attractive, and it was a predicament for them when they faced the option of going to China.

Emily: I have lived my whole life so far in Ethiopia. China, I don't know about it. I have a great place here with my family. When I go to China, I'm leaving behind all these, all my current life. I'm not happy at all.

Like Emily, most Ethiopian wives knew little about China, which gave them no ground to cultivate their desire for China. Nevertheless, China's economic expansion produced the international migration flow from China and Ethiopia's internal rural-urban migration flow. The convergence of these two flows has made Sino-Ethiopian cross-border marriage possible. However, bringing Chinese to Ethiopia does not necessarily produce an environment that facilitates marriages (e.g., Driessen's construction sites). As I demonstrate in the next part, private capital instead of the state capital and the manufacturing industry rather than infrastructure construction, created a more tolerant condition for the intimacies and marriages between Chinese and locals.

*Global connection: Chinese shop-floors and sustained Sino-Ethiopian social networks*

During the fieldwork in Ethiopia, I rarely found any Chinese private enterprise that upheld stringent and collective management (Lee, 2017) or racial distancing policies (Driessen, 2019). They were often small factories in the manufacturing industry whose shop-floor served as the primary meeting places for Sino-Ethiopian couples. These Chinese factories are often low-tech and labor-intensive, knocked out by China's industrial restructure and upgrading since the 2000s. Many of these enterprises are from east coastal China that moved to Ethiopia to enjoy low labor costs and lenient regulation. Factory owners usually brought dozens of low-skilled workers from their Chinese branches to replicate their manufacturing models in China. Besides, they hired many untrained young Ethiopians. Many of them were women in their 20s. Courtship and flirting occurred on the shop-floors.

Lillian, an Ethiopian wife, met her husband on a rainy day:

My shoes were broken. I asked him to repair my shoes. He threw my shoes and gave me 100 birr (ETB) ... I was surprised, but I also knew that he was a kind person. After that, he started to bring me food and give me money for food. When I opened my lunchbox, he also brought his lunchbox. He sat beside me, and we ate our dinner together. So, the workers saw that we were having dinner together. They started to tell me, "He's in love with you."

This story is typical of how a Chinese man started a relationship with his Ethiopian wife. The management of these privately owned factories generally had no interest in interfering with employees' personal affairs. In fact, a chief manager of a textile

mill had several local mistresses for himself. In another trading company, a deputy manager married one of his Ethiopian colleagues. They thus had no legitimacy to keep their Chinese subordinates from cohabitating with or marrying locals. Also, the employers supported anyone who needed to arrange a wedding in Ethiopia. For example, a footwear factory in Addis Ababa offered salary advances and cars to Chinese employees who needed to organize their weddings.

The Sino-Ethiopian social networks served as another critical connection for marriage formation. Several Chinese husbands I interviewed have lived in Ethiopia and worked for the same Chinese companies for over ten years. Such a bond accumulated through the stable living arrangement further offered other Chinese single men opportunities. Zhu met Anny during another Sino-Ethiopian couple, Zhang and Sara's wedding. The groom was Zhu's colleague, and the bride was Anny's high school classmate.

Zhu: My wife was their bridesmaid. Then Zhang introduced her to me. He probably wanted me also to marry a local woman, and then he wouldn't be the only one here. I felt she was a decent person, not a casual one. I'm not casual too. Zhang told me, a woman like this would help me in the future.

Anny: Then the next time he visited them, he asked my friend to invite me. Later, he went back to China and called me from China! He told me he wanted to be with me. Otherwise, he didn't need to come back to Ethiopia. I told him, "Ok. Come. We'll try."

Besides connecting the potential spouses, such social networks also played a critical role in convincing the spouses if they hesitated initially. Most of the spouses organized their weddings a month or shorter after their first encounter. There was a need for an established credit that these spouses could rely on. For example, when Zhu asked Anny to move in together, she turned to Sara for advice: She [Sara] married a Chinese man, and she once worked with him [Zhu] too. Then Sara said, "He's Ok. You can try. After you try, then you can decide if you want to marry him." A while after Zhu married Anny, Sara's mother convinced her niece to marry one of Zhang's colleagues and later convinced her niece's sister to marry another Chinese worker. When Zhang returned to China, Zhu assumed the position of marriage negotiator. He then helped several Chinese men find Ethiopian wives.

Similarly, in Zhao and Nancy's matchmaking, Zhao's boss, Dong, was a key figure. Dong came to Ethiopia several years before Zhao and had built up his reputation among the local people. He bought a piece of land from Nancy's uncle to build his carpet factory. Furthermore, he hired several members of Nancy's extended family. One of Nancy's cousins, Ahmed, talked about his boss with gratefulness, indicating that Dong was "xin hao" (goodhearted). He told me that Dong not only appointed him as a team leader with a decent salary but also helped him to build a

new house. With the vouch from Dong, Zhao was confident about getting Nancy from the beginning.

Zhao: I kept going. Why? I got back up. Her uncle and aunt really looked me up. I knew her uncle already. He kept telling her I was a really good guy. Then I got support from my boss. I was confident and kept pursuing her.

*Global imagination: Localized material and nonmaterial desires*

The motivations behind these Chinese men's and Ethiopian women's marriage decisions were unsurprisingly complex pertaining to material and nonmaterial desires. Sometimes, the courtship could be very romantic.

Katherine's husband is an engineer in an Italian team that manages a dam in a remote area of Ethiopia. When they started dating, the man had to find excuses to return to Addis Ababa from his remote workplace.

Katherine: The company policy was very strict. So, he had to make an excuse to come to Addis to see me. The excuse was he had a problem with his teeth. The company had a connection with the Korean Hospital. But they also had an Italian doctor there. But he said, "No, no, no. I have to go to Addis to the Korean hospital." They sent him to Addis. He came here, and he lost one [good] tooth [couldn't stop laughing] ... He had to take one tooth out.

For Katherine and many other Sino-Ethiopian spouses, love and intimacy are important in their marriages. But their marriages were also driven by practical concerns. For many Chinese husbands, marrying Ethiopian women was primarily for social expectations. Like Zhu always told me, marrying his wife was the last chance for a man like him, a divorcee in his 40s, to be "completed" as a Chinese man: a beloved husband, a filial son, and a caring father.

The marriage decisions could sometimes be carefully weighed. Before Liang decided to marry his wife, he had more than ten hours of soul-searching dialogue with Zhu. He hesitated to marry a Black woman and was afraid his children would be "too Black." Zhu finally convinced him to settle down regardless of compromises, as he did for himself. Once, he fought with Anny during dinner. Zhu was too angry to organize his broken Amharic. Then he turned to me and pointed at Anny, "You tell her! Tell her straight! If a man has any other option, who would marry a woman here?" Anny somehow got the meaning. She replied with contempt, "I know your Chinese men. If you guys have good options back home, you wouldn't have to come all the way here." Like this dispute, the marriage was often a settlement and a Plan B.

Christina was Lu's Plan B as well. While he was with Christina, Lu always thought about getting back with his Chinese ex-wife. After hearing about Christina's pregnancy, his first reaction was to fly straight back to China to seek the last chance of reconciliation with his ex-wife.

Lu: [After I went back], I couldn't get along with her (ex-wife) anymore. So, I called Christina not to get the abortion. I will come back in 3 or 4 months. Then I was here again. My son was born. Now, with this son, I was determined to walk down this road. My road back home was blocked. She told me clearly we wouldn't get back together again. I took the option in Ethiopia. A bit choiceless.

Ethiopian women are reportedly reluctant to establish intimacy without getting financial support in return, as there is less chance for women to be financially self-sufficient in Ethiopia (Mains, 2013). Among the wives from rural areas, their incentives to marry Chinese men are driven by the logic of the local marriage market. Nancy left her hometown after failing high school exams. She came to work in a textile mill near Addis Ababa. But she found the working environment unbearable: "The machine was too loud and noisy. I couldn't stand it. I left in one day." She chose to marry this Chinese man who promised to treat her well.

Nancy: You know that you don't always marry the man you love. I just don't give priority to love. I give priority to the longer good ... Since I didn't achieve my goal when I was studying, I switched my goal to being a good housewife and a mother.

Lillian was a 17-year-old girl when she first met her husband. She was still in high school and worked part-time during the summer holiday. She almost dropped out because the family might be unable to pay her tuition fee. Her then-future husband paid for it for her. As Lillian told me,

I didn't love him. I feel his kindness, not love, but his kindness. That's what attracted me. His kindness, his generosity. His generosity attracted me, not his love.

The motivations behind marriages differ from one to another. However, neither the material nor the nonmaterial desires are relevant to migrating to China. These wives' decisions often followed the local marriage market's logic regardless of whether they looked for a loved one, a caring one, or a capable one. Migration to China is not the means to achieve these women's expectations for marriage.

Eight years into their marriage, Anny and Zhu have not settled on whether they would move to China. Not only did she have concerns about life in China, but she also had an entrepreneurial vision for herself in Ethiopia. She set up a small business twice to sell different products from Chinese factories, both of which eventually failed. But she was still confident about the next opportunity.

Anny: My husband's vision and mine are very different. He likes to live in a place and raise children with enough income. But not for me! This lifestyle is below the expectation that I envisioned for myself ... If there is another opportunity, I have the feeling that I can do more this time.

Besides Anny's business ambition, Lillian had already accepted to be a housewife. In 2019, she gave birth to a boy, and in 2021, her daughter was born. To register their marriage legally in China, Lillian visited Bao's hometown. As she remembered, China was developed more than she could imagine, and Bao's family treated her as their daughter. However, Lillian still hesitated about Bao's plan to reside in China permanently.

Lillian: I know I'll go to China. But I'm not sure I can stay there very long. What about my mother? What about my family? China is not bad at all. The people are so nice. But I'm worried about separating from my family.

This kind of motivation is aligned with what Paul Statham (2020: 3) calls "unintended transnationalism" that he found in Thailand: "Intercultural living with a foreigner is a byproduct of her aim to secure a better life by initiating a partnership." His case differs from mine because Thai women were actively searching for Western men. They expected Westerners to be more tolerant of their previous marital experiences or other "disadvantages." But most Ethiopian wives had no such fantasy about their husbands or the country they were from. These men happened to be available due to China's expansion in Ethiopia.

#### DISCUSSION: SINO-ETHIOPIAN CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGE AS AN IDEAL TYPE

This research is built on the experiences of Sino-Ethiopian spouses who formed their marital relationships in Ethiopia. The mechanism and process of such marriage formations are considered an ideal type or a theoretical case. As John Walton (1992: 122) argues, "Cases are always hypotheses." To theorize the Sino-Ethiopian marriage, I did not directly dive into the complexity and entanglements of these nuanced and private relationships. Instead, I reformulated the "natural" case of these marriages into a theoretical case with a specific interest in how cross-border marriage was formed without the commonly seen global forces, connections, and imaginations. When the old model does not fit, this new phenomenon is "either a different kind of case or one that cuts across conventional boundaries" (Walton, 1992: 128).

Global China is powerful in Ethiopia. While China's state capital concentrates on infrastructure, Chinese private investors have set up numerous manufacturing plants. Yet China's visibility in Ethiopia has been limited. Its influence fails to penetrate ordinary Ethiopians' daily lives. Furthermore, due to China's incompatibility between hard and soft power, ordinary Ethiopians often find China lacking desirability,

especially compared to the Global North. China fails to perform one of the critical roles as the global forces that often shape cross-border marriage formation because China is not the desired migration destination.

Certain global forces produce connections that embody their creators and spread the influences of macro forces on micro individuals. As an emergent global power, China is new to Ethiopia. There has not been enough time for a transnational family network between China and Ethiopia, which often takes decades to accumulate, as compared to North America and Western Europe. Moreover, China lacking desirability to be a migration destination provides no incentives for the migration brokerage industry to grow. However, the rapid expansion of China's hard power in Ethiopia has brought around 60,000 Chinese to Ethiopia (eNCA, 2016), including many unmarried or divorced Chinese men under pressure and social expectations to form a family.

As previous studies showed (Lee, 2017; Driessen, 2019; Yan et al., 2019), Chinese-Ethiopian encounters alone did not automatically produce cross-border marriages. Therefore, the Sino-Ethiopian cross-border marriage I observed should not be simplistically explained as a cultural pattern that the Chinese or people from Eastern Asia are obsessed with the idea of family formation. Nor can it be interpreted as merely a supply-demand equilibrium in the marriage market. These unions are an emergence that was induced by a conjuncture of several grounded factors.

First, a fair amount of Chinese investment entered Ethiopia's manufacturing sector and was lured by the competitive price of labor. Unlike the construction sites where employees were often without gender balance, the shop-floors of textile and footwear plants need both male and female workers. Chinese factory owners normally brought along a team of experienced Chinese male workers who used to work for the same owners in China. Although these workers were often low-skilled with limited education and needed their employers to forge the expertise certifications to pass Ethiopia's labor immigration requirements, they were invited to operate machines in the production line for the new plants in Ethiopia. Also, due to Ethiopia's low level of industrialization and vocational training (Oya and Schaefer, 2021), there was not enough supply of well-trained local workers for the influx of Chinese factories. Thus, the Chinese male workers were asked to repeatedly renew their short-term contracts despite their salaries usually being 20 times higher than their local colleagues. It provided the time and opportunities for these Chinese men to accumulate local social networks and connections. As presented in this study, the local networks, instead of random encounters, played a critical role in convincing Ethiopian women to marry their husbands.

Given China's unbalanced hard and soft power as global force and Chinese shop-floors and Sino-Ethiopian social networks as global connections, the global imaginations of the spouses were largely localized. The seemingly contradictory term of localized global imaginations means that the spouses were clearly aware of the transnational nature of such marriages, as men and women are of different

racess, ethnicities, languages, nationalities, etc. However, the marriage incentives for both Chinese men and Ethiopian women were locally brewed. The Chinese men did not anticipate or plan to find a local wife before arriving in Ethiopia. Their ideas for marriage were either a byproduct of long-term socialization of the local society or developed from sexual partnerships. For the Ethiopian women, the localized incentives were even clearer. Initially, they had extremely limited knowledge about China except for some vague ideas. Through familiarization and interactions, a few Chinese men, among others, have become acceptable and even attractive to these Ethiopian women. They later dated, cohabitated, and eventually married. But marriageable Chinese men did not bring about the kind of desires that we often observed among Global South women toward Global North men or the Global North countries. In this study, migration to China is not the core incentive for Sino-Ethiopian cross-border marriage. Rather, these Ethiopian women experienced what Paul Statham (2020) calls “unintended transnationalism.”

## CONCLUSION: SOUTH-SOUTH CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGE

Sino-Ethiopian marriage in Ethiopia can reveal an understudied side of China-Africa engagement. Unlike studies primarily with macro foci, this study explored the private and intimate interaction between Chinese nationals and local Africans. Also, this study’s findings of vibrant interactions between Chinese men and local women are contrary to the purported images of segregated Chinese in Ethiopia. Despite insufficient soft power in Ethiopia, the lack of common connections for marriage migrations, and thus the motivation of migrating to China, most of these Chinese men eventually secured a local Ethiopian wife.

While using the theoretical device of ideal type, I distance this research from the studies equipped with several widely applied concepts, such as “social locations” (Mahler and Pessar, 2001) or “marriage-scapes” (Constable, 2005b). Instead of describing how different variables influenced the formation of Sino-Ethiopian marriage, I allowed a certain level of abstraction within each category of the “three axes.” The previous studies of cross-border marriages acknowledged individuals with structures. But they often failed to explain how specific structures affected individuals’ exertions of agency and why agents acted accordingly or against the structures. By merely listing various “marriage-scapes” (Constable, 2005b) or individuals’ “social locations” created by “socially stratifying factors” (Mahler and Pessar, 2001), the structures were often treated as backgrounds that only appeared in articles’ introductions and not mentioned thereafter. Moreover, the scholars equipped with such conceptual tools would expect structural factors to be scattered and thus reflected respectively in micro-practices or narrations, which risks overlooking the structures that are seemingly absent or that indirectly influence the field. For example, being unfamiliar with China does not mean that Ethiopian wives are out of touch with the world. They mostly know about Europe and America. When she was in high school, Nancy even dreamed of going to the United States for a college

education. Two other wives also worked in the Gulf region as domestic workers. The existence of the Global North was a constant reference even when the couple's negotiations and bargains were cloaked in a Sino-Ethiopian context.

Therefore, emphasizing the "China factor" is not enough to understand the uniqueness of Sino-Ethiopian marriages in this study. The Sino-Ethiopian intimacy showed different dynamics in Chinese construction sites in northern Ethiopia (Driessen, 2019). Likewise, defining these marriages as an ideal type of South-South cross-border marriage does not only indicate that both husbands and wives are from Global South countries. This novel ideal type should always be explained through a conjuncture of macro-micro interconnections of global forces, global connections, and global imaginations. This paper explains the novelty of the specific time-space constituted by China's incompatible hard and soft power as global forces, factories, and Sino-Ethiopian social networks as connections, localized imagination without migration incentives. A similar type of marriage formation process can emerge between another rising South (Dargin, 2013) and a developing South.

After 20 years of "going out," China has begun to turn itself from a marriage-migrant-sending country to a receiving one. The occurrence of Sino-Ethiopian marriage calls for a paradigm shift in understanding and researching this novel ideal type of cross-border marriage. China will not be the last rising South. Countries with large manufacturing shares in their economy and dense populations will walk on a similar path after they experience the crisis of overaccumulation that China did during the turn of the twentieth century. After rapid development and urbanization, a marriage squeeze would occur in emerging economies like India, Vietnam, and Thailand. There will be a resembling story when they expand to a preindustrial Global South.

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