

Race, Gender, and Diasporic Belonging:

A critical interpretive study on Chinese immigrant women's lived experiences of transnational maternity in Brooklyn Chinatown

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Abstract

This paper is from an ongoing larger project interrogates how migrant Chinese women in the Brooklyn Chinatown engage various notions of race and gender in their diasporic identity formation during maternity in transnational context. Through intensive ethnographic interviews collected in 2012-2013, I explore how individual women of the new Brooklyn Chinatown pick and choose what to experience and what not to experience during their cross-cultural encounter between hometown tradition and modern Western medicine. I argue that such choices are beyond ethno-medical or ethno-cultural, but identity-constituting and transnationally political, in which the women actively explore their “Chineseness” and diasporic gender identities. In this paper, I extract two notions of “race” through which the traditionalists’ normative views enact in women’s lived experience of transnational maternity, 1) an authentic Chinese maternity health (i.e. Chineseness as the physiological other to Whites), and 2) nostalgia to the Confucian motherly ideal (i.e. Chineseness as the moral other and superior). I argue those are responses of racial anxiety against various postcolonial racial politics that meant to exert maternal agency and should not be simply interpreted as passive internalization of the self as the inassimilable racial other. In addition, I offer a set of narratives of heterogeneous maternity experiences that refuse the solidifying notion of diaspora on 8th Ave to challenge and expand borders and Chineseness in diasporic belonging.

Key words: *diaspora, Chineseness, gender belonging, transnational maternity, ‘yuezi’* (Chinese traditional postpartum care as ‘doing the month’)

A vignette

“Amei, a 45-year old Chinese mother of two and a sales person at a 99-Cent Store on 8th Ave, Brooklyn was chatting with me and her woman co-worker Nicole, also a Fujian Chinese mother of two, in her choppy Mandarin with strong Fujian accent:

A: “Of course you need to do your month[1] (‘zuo yuezi’) after giving birth. That is the most important thing for a Chinese woman. Other things you can perhaps learn to adapt, but you body is always Chinese. I didn’t listen to my mother and bathed and brushed my teeth with cold water several times after giving birth to my second kid. And now my teeth are loose. I have bad teeth because I didn’t do those maternity things the Chinese way.”

N: “(Laughs) That is gross. You have bad teeth because you didn’t brush your teeth frequent enough! Don’t bother telling your folks (in China) that you live in New York and still have backward mindset like that.”

A: “But this is not backwardness,” Amei argued back, “I’m true to my body and I don’t want to be pretentiously American like some others... Also, that ‘baby blue’ thing after birth, only fragile, spoiled “laowai” (foreigner) women have that. Chinese women, well, we Fuzhou women, don’t think much about ourselves. I don’t believe those new immigrant young girls from the cities (of China) when they talk about it. They just need busier jobs.”

N: “Well, I believe in it.” Nicole replied. “My sister experienced it and the whole family was worried. Can you say we are not as Chinese as you?” (Laughs)

[1] Doing the month (zuo yuezi) is the traditional Chinese postpartum care practice that’s commonly practiced throughout history. It’s a set of restrictive rules that govern a woman’s postpartum mobility, diet and personal care (e.g. bathing, teeth brushing, etc.) thirty days after giving birth. The extensiveness and particularities vary across regions and generations of families in China.

Introduction

Migrant motherhood -- as an identity signifier and unique transnational experience -- has been an interdisciplinary topic that yearns for robust qualitative research. Among feminist works on motherhood, it is belied that “migrant maternal practices have been devalued in theoretical writing about migrant communities” (Gedalof, 2009, p. 81). Irene Gedalof in *Feminist Review*’s 2009 special issue on “birthing” proposes that feminist scholarship calls for “an expanded concept of reproduction in migrant motherhood studies that include not only childbirth and motherhood, but works of reproducing identity, heritage, culture, and structures of belonging” (Gedalof, 2009, p. 81). This essay enthusiastically responds to this call to investigate how Chinese diasporic racial and gender identities are negotiated and expressed during maternity by a group of migrant mothers living and working on 8th Avenue, Brooklyn, one of New York’s City’s newest Chinatowns.

Many migrant motherhood studies have expressed that migrant mothers face severe challenges in dual transition as migrants and parents (Erel, 2011; Liangputtong, 2001, 2003; Rodriguez, 2010). Liangputtong (2001) for example in her works on Thai motherhood experiences in Australia explicitly argues that migrant mothers are “twice as minority and twice marginalized” (p.195). I explore issues of diasporic Chinese gender identities following that vein of thought. Yet drawing from in-depth ethnographic interviews, I argue that the transitioning struggles of migrant mothers are more than “twice”. As beyond the two obvious identities of “migrant” and “parent” that call to be re-negotiated, the assumed original and ‘native’ identities of being ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chinese woman’ are also destabilized into open signifiers with dynamic and heterogeneous

meanings. In another word, what kind of Chinese, or how one would express and live her Chinese identity through engendering experience of maternity is my upmost concern.

Exploring and decolonializing “Chineseness” is a theoretical mission for this essay. Historically, under the backdrop of the Western cultural construct of Chinatown is a frequent assumption of a collective and mostly homogenous Chineseness, in which its residents are mythologized and perpetuated as the racial other in the colonialist imaginary (Anderson, 1987). In the current moment of globalization, however, prominent works of cultural scholars call research attention to heterogeneous and dynamic versions of “Chineseness(es)” that are produced by complex global and local geopolitics. Aihwa Ong’s works, for example focus on hegemonies and struggles in different Chinese diasporic communities in the global flow of capital and migration. Her *Flexible Citizenship* (1999) discusses how Chineseness shifts its political meaning and agency during transnationalism’s reconfiguration of nation-states for the affluent and elitist Chinese diaspora. And her *Bhudda is Hiding* (2003) focuses on “the *other*” diasporic Asians, the Cambodian refugees’ subjectivity in suburban California during the same transnationalism. Ien Ang’s work *On not speaking Chinese* (2008) focuses on the gaps between Chineseness(es) that are imagined by the East and West under different global politics, and Chinese diaspora as “symbolic capital” enacts “both liberation and confinement” (p.12), as “a double edged sword” (p.13). My essay focus on the women’s notion of race and diasporic and gendered Chineseness during their transnational maternity, and how such notions have come to be constructed in relations to the non-Chinese (“laowai”)

To this end, I also ground my analytical rigor in the transnational feminist paradigm of treating *diaspora* as a postcolonial framework that “reconfigures race, gender, class, and nation, etc.” rather than the traditional notion of diaspora as a simple analytics of travel, displacement, and adaptation. (Campt & Thomas, 2008, p.2) The traditional diaspora scholarship often “privileges the mobility of masculine subjects as the primary agents of diaspora formation” and “often deploys notions of origin and authenticity” (p.2) that “stress community solidarity at the expense of analytic attention to key differences within and among diasporic populations.” (p.3) Rooted in the alternative, trans nationalist feminist paradigm, this essay visits Chinese *diaspora* in Brooklyn firstly “as a site of political aspiration and solidarity” (p.2) from which migrant Chinese mothers draw group identification and maternal agency from traditional practices of maternity, and secondly treating *diaspora* as a postcolonial “social, cultural, and political rubric” (p.3) in which “mutual constitution of race, gender, class, and nation” (p.1) takes place so that heterogeneous Chineseness and Chinese diasporic femininities are explored.

Particularly, when it comes to indigenous maternity knowledge and care practices, I find Stuart Hall’s (1996) notion of “hailing” as a process of cultural interpellation especially illuminating. Lena Sawyer (2008) once presented a fine analysis of how race is engendered through cultural *hailing* (e.g. black aesthetics, femininity from older generation and global popular culture) among black diaspora in Sweden -- that as “people are ‘hailed’ to community, they also exert a degree of agency to the extent that they can choose whether or not to ‘invest’ in (engage/ respond) to such calls and representations of belonging and community” (Sawyer, 2008, p.88). As Chineseness becomes an open

signifier among diaspora members, traditional birthing wisdoms and maternity care as cultural practices and heritage “hail” to women as they negotiate their racial and gender identities and belonging. In response, the women construct their transnational identifications of Chineseness and gender.

Brooklyn’s 8th Ave -- a new Chinatown

8th Avenue Brooklyn -- formally known as Sunset Park – is one of New York’s newest and largest Chinese communities running from 42nd to 68th Street along 8th Avenue and expanding. Being a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood up till the 1990s, its Chinese population has increased by 157% from 1990 to 2010 (Hum, 2014, p. 16). Due to 8th Ave’s strategic location between the city’s boroughs and cheaper cost than Manhattan, new waves of Chinese immigrants from Mainland China along with the fleeing residents of Canal Street (historic Manhattan Chinatown) from post-9/11 gentrification made 8th Ave home. Today, 8th Avenue Sunset Park along with Canal Street and Flushing, Queens, are NYC’s three Chinese immigration hubs. Chinese immigrants in this global neighborhood ‘play both roles as affluent gentrifiers and working-class residents facing displacement’ (Hum, 2014, p.16).

Different from Canal Street, 8th Ave lacks the traditional Chinatown garment shops or tourist souvenir shops. Instead, it is abundant with trendy Chinese goods and services that are aimed for intra-diasporic consumption, particularly for the new immigrants from Fujian, the dominant group of 8th Ave community. It is rich in different

Chinese regional cuisines, Chinese fashion and beauty shops featuring non-Western products and aesthetics for Asian bodies, hair, and skin, maternity shops, daycares, laundromats, travel agencies with services for non-English speaking Chinese tourists, and shuttle services (as a cheaper alternative than New York MTA subway) that connect 8th Ave to Canal Street in Manhattan and Flushing Queens. In regard to maternity services, one can find the complete chain of services and products that guarantee an authentic Fujianese maternity experience if one chooses to, from special food and care recipes, foods and herbs, Chinese medicine doctors and services, maternity care and beauty products, doulas “*yuesaos*” (expert caregivers for the postpartum 30-day care for mother and baby), etc. So Chineseness here, even within something culturally unique and specific like maternity, does not require contact with territorial space of China for its production, but was reinforced through familial and neighborly communications as well as the business circulation of Chinese goods and services in the urbanity of New York. 8th Ave thus is a powerful and complex locale for the production of cultural “hailings” of transnational Chinese culture and diverse Chinese diasporic identifications in response.

Chineseness is also reinforced by racial and cultural othering produced by linguistic signifiers on 8th Avenue. One most often used term from women’s narratives in this paper is “laowai”, which can be directly translated as “foreign” or “foreigner”. Chineseness is usually by default a natural position of the non-foreign in cultural representations on 8th Avenue, which will be explained in detail in the analysis section of the essay.

The Research

The data used for this essay is secondary data from a larger intensive ethnographic interviewing data set collected for an acculturation and identity project on Chinese immigrant mothers in Brooklyn New York from March 2012 to December 2014. Due to the fact that I was visibly pregnant and postpartum at the time of the interviews -- and that I was open about my pregnancy with the participants as the researcher -- rich narratives of acculturation and identity on maternity experiences organically emerged. This essay focuses on the maternity narratives from the data set to discuss the subjects' notions of race and gender in thinking and making decisions on their maternity health. Instead of trying to produce any generalizable "truth" about 8th Ave community, the paper draws theoretical analyses to describe the heterogeneous notions of Chineseness regarding race and gender in the community.

The Participants

The fifteen interviewees from the larger data set are with diverse backgrounds in terms of generation, class, and education level. They were recruited to the study using the snowballing method in which four personal contacts of mine volunteered to participate, and then they introduced their neighbors, colleagues, and church friends to join the study. They age from 26 to 47. Six of them work at shops on Eighth Avenue, six of them are housewives who live but not work in the neighborhood, and three of them own or co-own businesses on the street. All of them are immigrants with Green Card. All of them are

married with Chinese husbands and gave birth in Brooklyn. Three of them have post-secondary academic degrees. All of them have only basic knowledge of English, and use Mandarin, Cantonese, and Fujianese in their daily encounters. The time they spent in the United States ranges from 2.5 years to 14 years.

As this paper is part of a larger book project, not all participants are quoted and analyzed here in this essay but elsewhere in the book during discussions of further theoretical issues.

The Data Collection

At least three sessions of life history interviews were conducted with each of the fifteen women during the period from March 2012 to December 2014, either at sites chosen by the interviewees or on the phone. They were paid hourly by my research grant provided by the Diversity Project Development Fund of the City University of New York. The Internal Review Board of The City University of New York approved the interviews. Life history in the data collection deals simultaneously with the past, present, and the future around the theme of immigration and acculturation. The life history research approach in the critical, interpretive research tradition is located within the naturalist-interpretive paradigm, which has a principal focus on understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social worlds. (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 17). Due to the fact that I was visibly pregnant and postpartum at the time of the interviews -- and that I was also a diasporic Chinese woman who spoke Mandarin and lived by the neighborhood -- small

talks on pregnancy, birthing, and babies usually happened before the formal interviews, and themes of transnational maternity frequently re-occurred during participants' narratives on diasporic gender identity. Impromptu follow-up questions for richer narratives were then extended. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The recorded data was translated and transcribed by the researcher, who is fluent with both Mandarin and English.

Analysis

'Hail' from an authentic Chinese maternal body -- racial anxiety and paradoxical coping in postcolonial racial politics

In the opening vignette, Amei believes her loosened teeth were results of her not strictly following the Chinese (Fujianese) traditional rules of postpartum care (yuezi). By analyzing three similar narratives believing authentic Chinese maternal health in this section, I argue that 8th Avenue women in their diasporic birthing experience encounter the postcolonial political paradox in which they endeavor to resist whiteness' racial neutrality in Western medical system while internalizing the colonialist imagery of Chinatown being 'clannish and inassimilable' (Anderson, 1987).

Amei from the vignette claims, "other things you can perhaps learn to adapt, but you body is always Chinese" (Amei: April 30, 2013). She also believes that there exist some fundamental physical differences in the biological makeup of her body that signal

authentic Chineseness. That authentic Chineseness is by default in a natural binary opposition of that of “laowai” (foreigners), is unchangeable and inassimilable due to its unquestionable biological nature. Traditional maternity care knowledge in such narrative has become a significant form of “cultural hailing” in the Stuart Hall (1996) sense in diasporic context, in which each member is “hailed to” and “compelled to respond in order to express their membership status with the community”. Amei’s self-reported consequence of suffering from loosened teeth is her suggesting that her violation to tradition was proven to be also a violation to her own biological racial health needs, that her racial identity preconditions her maternal body and her culturally responsible behavior to adhere and pass on tradition of maternity. In another words, that physical authentic Chineseness in her own construction/conceptualization is the site where she sources her Chinese diasporic identity and belonging, where she can rightfully (with agency and control) distinguish herself as non-White in her subjectivity, and where she is empowered with the duty of the larger community to protect and reproduce that belonging.

Whether Amei’s claim bears any medical validity is not the focus of this essay but her identity negotiation process during maternity and her subjective differentiation of “race”. Her very conviction of the biological difference of race, as well as maternity women’s inescapable duty to protect tradition is resisted by some of my other interviewees with different generational, educational, and immigration backgrounds, which will be discussed in a later section. Yet, Amei’s themed narrative on physical authenticity of Chinese maternal health was echoed by many others. By further using the

following similar narratives, I am proposing that such positing the self as the ultimate biological racial other is a coping mechanism to deal with a set of complex transnational politics -- that on one hand, they try to dispute whiteness' invisible racial neutrality (and colorblindness) in Western medical system, and on the other hand internalizing the colonialist idea of Chinese migrants as the inassimilable alien.

Jane, a 32-year-old masseuse on Eighth Ave. and a mother of two, explained her following thoughts to me:

“As people we Chinese just have been around for longer than the foreigners (‘laowai’). Our culture is five thousand years old. And we had our distinct diet and medicine for that long, too. This made the basics of our body (‘tizhi’) very different than the foreigners (laowai). That’s why Chinese women during pregnancy and postpartum just can’t have cold or raw food like the foreigners. You really shouldn’t touch cold food like watermelon or peaches or ice cream when you are pregnant. Our bodies will react...It’s no joke and it’s because something in our body that’s Chinese... There is no way to explain that to the American doctors and they will never understand.” (Jane: April 2, 2013)

To Jane, racial difference is also a “truth” in physicality. She makes an effort to ponder on why but the reasons are mythologized through history and cultural habits which she obviously takes pride. She also demonstrated her comfort and security expressing such inexplicable and mythical biological meanings of race in front of me, assuming my total agreement simply because of my visible identity as a Chinese woman who just had a baby. It is through such conviction does Jane feel at ease, in control of her

sense of cultural identity. Both Jane and Amei used 'laowai' to signify the non-Chinese racial others in their narratives. "Laowai" is a term commonly used in Mainland China in the recent decades that can be translated as an informal and endearing term for "foreigners". It is a term commonly and frequently used on 8th Avenue- popularized by new immigrants from China -- to signify people and things that are non-Chinese, beyond the border of Eighth Avenue, or beyond Eighth Avenue's inter-ethnic labor relations and services. For example, Stop and Shop and Key Foods are referred to as "laowai stores" whereas Asian Markets on the street are just "stores" or "markets" without adjectives. New York City MTA system is "laowai train" or "laowai buses" versus Chinatown shuttles are merely "buses". Yet, Amei and Jane, as well as my other interviewees, mostly used "laowai" to refer to Whites or White Americans. Hispanics were mostly referred to as "laomo" the Mexicans, among my interviewees. Thus the buzz word "laowai" ubiquitously used on 8th Avenue -- in its simplistic and problematic racial binary-- carries the facile racial understanding and cultural belonging in the women's subjectivity, that it is in the practices of being almost xenophobically non-white that they belong, that their Chineseness is organic, authentic, always-already-there, and unquestionable.

This meaning of race is explained by theoretical work on the cultural politics of Chinatown. Kay Anderson (1987) in her classic article "The Idea of Chinatown" eloquently argues that the imperialist social construction of the term "Chinatown" reinforces "notions of Chineseness as clannish and inassimilable and Chinese immigrants as perpetual foreigners or symbolic 'aliens'" (p. 582). This notion of 'perceptual

difference' in the colonialist effects of whiteness has far-reaching consequences as being repeatedly enacted and internalized by generations of Chinese immigrants. Both Amei and Jane internalize and self-reproduce the perceptual racial difference as non-American or non-White, in searching for the biological meanings of race through maternity health. The idea of the *authentic* Chinese maternal health in their conceptualization does not simply signify physical differences, but more importantly, the fear for the non-fitting and non-caring general Western medical knowledge and its materialistic reality, an anxiety to the potential harm caused by such Western manipulation, and its own acute needs to be protected by indigenous Chinese knowledge and care.

Yet, it is very important to note that such self-othering is not merely a passive internalization of colonialist identification, but an active resistance towards the hegemonic whiteness' racial neutrality and colorblindness in Western medical system as well. In Jane's narrative, when used to refuse racial neutrality, that biological difference is coded not only with fear for the West but confidence and pride to "the five thousand years of history" and its wisdom. In such narrative, the East vs. West, Chinese versus Whites biological binary is mediated into a reversal cultural superiority versus inferiority, seniority versus novice binary in order to express cultural uniqueness and belonging in their own humble effort to undo colonial condition. I have collected more narrative data that further exemplify similar paradoxical struggle with colonialist racial politics.

Nancy, a 40-year-old restaurant owner who lived on Eighth Ave. for fourteen years had her three children in Brooklyn. She shared the following with me.

“Doing the month is important for a Chinese women, whatever the American doctors say. Just look and compare Chinese versus laowai (foreign) women you see here: an eighty year old Chinese woman would look like a 65-year-old in laowai’s (foreigners) eyes, and she would be still doing grocery shopping, cooking for the whole family, and helping take care of grandchildren. My grandma still helps at my house. And look at the old laowai (foreigner) women. They walk slowly and wobbly into my restaurant. And before they eat, they take out their numerous little pharmacy bottles and take their big handful of pills! ...Same with babies. I’ve never heard of any Chinese newborn on 8th Avenue that’s under eight pounds. But laowai (foreigner) babies are usually tiny. The moms are big but their newborns are as small as kittens. Chinese moms on the other hand are tiny but our babies are big”

(Nancy: May 22, 2013)

Nancy’s distinct pride for Chinese maternal health and disdain towards that of non-Chinese further illustrates her effort to assert a sense of racial superiority through physical racial differences. This idealized superiority in racial reproductive health is also coded by elderly women and babies, a continuum of identity and belonging through racial past and future. Such notion of racial difference is physical and physiological and thus self-evident, unquestionable, and undefeatable. By this token, such postcolonial biological meanings of race cannot be simply interpreted as naive, passive internalization of historical, imperialist racial identifications, a mere extension of historical racial relation, but a postcolonial act of struggle in its paradoxical racial condition to negotiate

agency, to assert pride, and to dispute whiteness' racial neutrality in modern medicine, and to claim cultural belonging.

'Hail' from the Confucian feminine ideal -- struggles against conceptions of normalized white femininity and traditional gender politics

Aside from the recurring notion of authentic Chinese maternal health that conditioned the continuity of traditional care practices as a *need*, many women's narratives also highlighted that such traditional practices were cultural acts that constitute Chinese feminine identity and diasporic belonging, that such continuity to adopt the practices were imposed by them as a moral obligation of cultural inheritance, policed by themselves, their family, or community on different levels. I argue that such moral obligations are both a perpetuation of the traditionally patriarchal Confucian feminine ideal, as well as a reaction of anxiety towards their conceptions of the normative white femininity in diasporic context. To provide some context, Confucianism -- as the most influential philosophical foundation of Chinese culture and thinking -- holds "the concept of a person (*ren*) as an ethical category" (Rosenlee, 2006, p. 36) and in which a woman's worth is defined by her relationality and service to her patriarchal family (p. 37) as daughter, wife and mother, in which the maternal role is the most central and maternal duties proceeds everything else. Here are some narratives on this theme where some women pay nostalgic praise to the traditional selfless and dutiful feminine ideal to anchor their sense of belonging:

Nicole, 38, Amei's co-worker at the 99-cent store in the vignette, expressed the following to me:

"What makes Chinese women different is not our body but how we behave during maternity. We care about our babies more than ourselves. I didn't care about being fat or not pretty or with stretch marks everywhere during my pregnancies. As long as that's what it takes to have a baby, I would go through anything. I guess we Chinese, especially immigrants can just endure hardships. We don't get spoiled like foreign (laowai) women." (Nicole: April 30, 2013).

Jia, 36, a housewife with one boy, explained similar sentiment:

"Chinese women know better about discipline. It's unimaginable to me how indulgent foreign (laowai) women are on TV smoking and drinking during pregnancy. I like coca-cola but didn't have a drop for two years till I was done breastfeeding. I also didn't care how I looked, and wore my husband's shirts and no make-up. ...But I guess even young mothers in China nowadays are more like foreign (laowai) women in that respect. My pregnant cousin in China spent a lot of money on Japanese stretchmark cream. I wouldn't spend money like that. We overseas Chinese carry the traditional virtues better." (Nicole, June 4th, 2013)

Nicole in the vignette openly disputed her co-worker Amei's idea that Chinese body is different, and called that thought "backward". Alternatively, in her own narrative here, she oriented her cultural belonging to the traditional feminine virtues, the Confucian feminine ideal of mothers being self-sacrificing, disciplined, and resilient. Jia did the

same, and compared herself with White (laowai) women on TV as well as her cousin in China. In such a vein of thought, the two women highlighted their Chineseness and diasporic belonging in their traditional Chinese femininity. By expressing their pride and nostalgia towards the Confucian feminine ideal, and at the same time differentiating themselves from the normative global white femininity that centers self and beauty, they position their diasporic Chinese gender identity as the moral other to Whites and moral superior to the Chinese nationals.

The notion of diasporic Chinese gender identity is not shared among my interviewees. On the contrary, in some other interviewees' experience, this very notion of Chinese traditional feminine ideal represents hegemonic power of traditional patriarchy. Instead of solidifying a collective diasporic gender identity, it alienates and evokes intergenerational conflicts. The following are two examples.

Mandy is a 29-year-old housewife. She has a baby girl and has been in the US for four years.

"I don't understand why it's a problem for everybody when I want to have some watermelon and paint my nails while pregnant. It's my body and my doctor said ok. What's the point of being in America if I don't even have the freedom to paint my nails?! And why it's a big deal that I just want to be like White women for a little bit and less Chinese?!" (Mandy: June 12, 2013).

Angie, a 28-year-old new mother, shared the following:

"I went to see a Chinese medicine doctor on the street (8th Avenue) for some skin rash during my second trimester because I didn't want any Western medicine with

chemicals from my American doctor. The doctor was an older man. After he asked and was told that I had goose meat two days before the rash, he was furious. He scolded me in front of his assistant and my mother-in-law that I was not being thoughtful of my baby and was too loose on myself eating hyper masculine (shang huo) food like that. He didn't give me anything and simply dismissed me by saying 'only your responsible eating behavior is the cure'. I felt I was treated like a silly child. I know my mother-in-law agreed with him and I felt her stare." (Angie: July 8th, 2013)

In the two stories, Mandy and Angie clearly suffered from the policing of their body embedded within the traditional maternity care practices. They viewed the traditional feminine ideal as hegemonic, and wrongfully reinforced by older generations of immigrants-- in diasporic services in the larger diasporic community. They saw little merit in positioning Chinese femininity as the moral other or superior to White femininity. Instead, Mandy aspired integration, a femininity "a little bit more like the Whites" and "less Chinese" with alternative, modern identifications of Chinese diasporic gendered belonging. Angie on the other hand didn't trust the "chemicals" of Western medicine, but her hope for traditional Chinese care wisdom was disappointed by unsolicited and unkind moral disciplinary advices from a representative of a traditional community patriarch. In both examples, the diasporic maternal body became a site where scripts of multiple patriarchies are at play -- the racial, the medical, the historical/traditional, and the generational.

Such disagreement on traditional femininity also sparks tension among intra-diasporic relations. Mandy's "everybody" in her diasporic world, Angie's Chinese medicine doctor and mother-in-law represent the anxiety of traditional values from the transnational past. They nostalgically wished to keep Chinese identity "authentic" against global whiteness through the maternal body's reproductivity of Chineseness in values and behaviors. That wish however conflicted with some individual women's endeavor to explore maternal agency in cultural integration. However, in between Mandy's wish to subscribe to white femininity ("to be like white women a little bit") and older generations' moral othering and denouncement towards white femininity lies ambivalently and frustratingly Angie and alike, that both racial discourses were alienating to some degree, that her symbolic act to find alternative self care for her non-White identity was futile, that the dominant diasporic gender relations were disappointing, that she has exhausted imaginative and psychological cultural space for her sense of belonging.

This tension among intra-diasporic relations, and the hardship in exploring alternative gender and belonging within the political paradox of Whiteness and Chinese traditional patriarchy will be further discussed in the following section.

Boundaries of diasporic Chineseness -- other intersections and struggles

In this concluding section of my analysis, I want to simply present several excerpts on the multifaceted and multi-layered struggles that refuse and resist any collective diasporic identity or solidarity on 8th Ave otherwise yearned for and celebrated in the

traditionalist identifications of Chineseness discussed in previous sections. These narratives add complexity to the 8th Ave Brooklyn Chinatown experience that I'm presenting in this essay. In-depth analyses of the meanings and tensions expressed by these narratives, as well as the powerful cultural identifications evoked by each individual story would take another paper or two to do their richness justice. I want to simply list them at the end of my analysis to highlight that there exist alternative experiences and views on Chineseness to emphasize that what influences diasporic identity formation -- racial and gender -- is beyond the simple East/ West, traditional/ modern, patriarchal/feminist spectrums. Generational, educational, regional, linguistic, and class differences are also important.

Linda is a 34-year-old mother of two girls. She lived on 8th Ave. for 11 years. She has been a housewife ever since her first pregnancy and self-disclosed that she suffered from postpartum depression for years.

"I don't like living on 8th Avenue. I'll move away tomorrow if my English is better. You have no idea what kind of Chinese people I have to deal with here. I'm an educated person with college degree in China and my neighbors in China were nice people, unlike here. When women in my building learned that I was pregnant with a girl, both times, they gave me looks of contempt in the elevator and a few of them stopped talking to me altogether. Yuezi (postpartum care) around them was nightmare. Whatever they told me to do regarding maternity was not meant entirely well. They meant to devalue me and hurt me. I'm in the process of persuading my husband to move away at least a few avenues to be closer to my church community."(Linda: January 20, 2014)

Lulu a 28-year-old housewife has been “around” 8th Ave for 7 years. She has a three-year-old daughter and is the most socio-economically secured among the women in my study:

“My husband owns a store here so I come here to shop and sometimes help him out. But during my pregnancy I only came here to eat and shop and have fun like getting my hair done or something. (Laughs) It’s great to shop here because you can find anything you need from Asia, and you don’t need to speak English! But I wouldn’t want to live here. I actually moved away four years ago even though we already bought a house here. I told my husband to rent it out because I wouldn’t want my baby to grow up here. We moved to New Jersey. It’s nicer and cleaner there....8th Ave doesn’t have the good aspects of America.” (Lulu: December 15, 2013)

Wendy is a 31-year-old housewife who is one of the very few northerners from China. She has been in Brooklyn for four years, goes to church with Linda and has a two year old girl who is back in China with her mom:

“I sent my baby back because I’m in the process of checking out places and really thinking about relocating, perhaps to LA. Their Chinatown is better with more Northerners and more Mandarin speaking Chinese like you. Loneliness was the worst thing happened to me during maternity. And if I have another baby here, I would go find another doctor who’s not a regular with 8th Avenue women. My last doctor wouldn’t tell me the sex of my baby till the beginning of my third trimester. She definitely thought I was one of those uneducated, gender-biased 8th Ave Chinese women...” (Wendy: January 20, 2014)

The three narratives respectively express how educational, class, and regional differences (from homeland) are lived and how they play important roles influencing women's belonging on 8th Avenue. Their memberships to 8th Ave community are experienced often as tension and resistance. The traditionalist normative identifications of Chineseness presented in the first two sections highlighting ancestry, authenticity, and heritage are not of interest to them. Instead, they refuse to identify to the continuum of "sameness" or solidarity of diasporic Chineseness that involve certain distinct racial and gender politics that they find alienating, and try to expand one's diasporic space and belonging in exploration of new diasporic frontiers with *other* cultural logics. "A few avenues away" for Linda is an imagined space of a more integrated and cosmopolitan Chineseness that involves less gender bias and a space that hosts her newly developed religious identity as a Christian (disclosed during the same interview). The New Jersey suburbia home to Lulu is the middle-class space of *real America*, where other 8th Ave residents dream but cannot achieve. LA Chinatown for Wendy promises *another* Chinese diasporic space that welcomes more regional and linguistic diversities from China and immigrants with higher education. The three women are among the most educated of my participants, and are all from urban cities in China unlike the other interviewees. Their journeys reconfiguring their postcolonial Chinese and women identities during transnational maternity – together with those discussed in the first two sections -- reveal the diasporic *uneven-ness and gaps* that transnational feminists claim to be distinct among diasporic subjects' individual relationships with the community (Campt, 2010; Grewal, 2004; Sawyer, 2008; Thomas, 2008). It therefore further illustrates that translating postcolonial intra-diasporic gaps and uneven-ness is just as important a task than studying

migrants' collective cultural adaptation in the social science lens. These disparate narratives also reveal the powerful and complex functions of *diaspora*: on one hand it is a "symbolic declaration of liberation and unity from the abject position of the 'ethnic minority' in an oppressive national racial hegemony in global relations" (Clifford, 1997, p. 255) through which subjects draw "utopian emotive pull" (Ang, 2008, p. 12) as benefits, and on the other hand it comes with a cost, that it is confining with a set of intra-diasporic hegemonies, for example traditional gender bias and historical regional relations and dominance.

Conclusion

This paper responds to the transnational feminist call that migrant motherhood and maternity need to be discussed beyond the discourses of health and social sciences, but in context of postcolonial cultural politics of identity and belonging. Through intensive ethnographic life interviews, the paper presents two different notions of race, or meanings of Chineseness that are actively engaged by different migrant mothers in their efforts to seek maternal agency. One of the notions is the mythologized physical racial difference possessed by the Chinese maternal body, and the other the fantasized Confucian feminine ideal against normative white femininity. Those notions of race and gender are both solidifying and alienating at the same time through lived experiences of different immigrant mothers. I also present a set of narratives that refuse a collective notion of diasporic race and gender identity in the 8th Ave community all together, that explore and expand the physical and emotional borders of Chineseness incessantly. This paper speaks directly on postcolonial problematics of space, gender, and diasporic belonging, and further solidifies transnational feminist paradigm of 'diaspora' not as a binary from home to settlement, a linear experience from origin to adaptation, but a

contested and complex process of going back and forth, of paradoxes and dilemmas, and of feminine strength and creativity.

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