



# Losing self to discover national citizenship: contestations over parental rights among the post-Soviet foreign wives in China

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**Losing self to discover national citizenship: contestations over parental rights among the post-Soviet foreign wives in China**

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3 **Losing self to discover national citizenship: contestations over parental rights**  
4 **among the post-Soviet foreign wives in China**  
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8 Elena Barabantseva\*  
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12 **Abstract**

13 Drawing on the life stories of post-Soviet women from Ukraine and Russia who  
14 married Chinese citizens and moved their married lives to China, this article examines  
15 how these women engage in intimate geopolitics in the adverse immigration  
16 environment for foreign family members. The elaborated argument maintains that the  
17 women -- driven by the uncertainty surrounding their legal and socio-economic status  
18 and the fear of forced separation from their children -- resort to their home citizenship  
19 or informal dual citizenship arrangements as leverage to defend parental rights against  
20 the backdrop of China's strict single citizenship regime. The women develop strategies  
21 to ensure their parental rights through citizenship structures available to them, and seek  
22 to remedy their emotional uncertainties amid the environment of limited and tenuous  
23 immigrant and family statuses in China. This paper develops analytical potential of  
24 intimate geopolitics through an analysis of post-Soviet wives' subjectivities constituted  
25 through the interplay of geopolitical structures and their emotional intensities.  
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38 Key words: China, child's citizenship, intimate geopolitics, marriage migration,  
39 maternal rights, post-Soviet identities.  
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49 on the earlier drafts of this article that helped to improve my argument. All  
50 inconsistencies in the analysis remain mine.  
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59 Relations in Politics Department and an affiliate member of Manchester China Institute at the University of  
60 Manchester.

## Introduction

Marriage migration as a global phenomenon and as the most popular form of migration in East Asia is a crossroads where negotiations of gender, personal desires, and governance of population through labour markets, marriage, property and citizenship law take place (Constable 2003, Robinson 2007, Jones and Shen 2008, Jones 2012, Faier 2015). These migration trends have been researched from the point of view of the changing demographic and fertility landscapes in the receiving societies, regional and global commodified marriage market (Chang and Wang 2002) and shifting labour relations (Piper and Roces 2003). Although the restrictive nature of citizenship laws for migrant women has also come under academic scrutiny, much less research has been conducted on migrant women's strategies of survival, adaptation, and reaffirmation of their independent subjectivities. These strategies are manifested, among other areas, in how they negotiate parental rights vis-a-vis their citizen spouse. In this essay I discuss how, amidst uncertainty, fear of separation from their children and mistrust of the Chinese state's recognition and protection of their parental rights, post-Soviet migrant spouses employ inconsistencies in citizenship regimes to their advantage in the effort to secure their parental rights. In the process, I argue, they engage in intimate geopolitics through the use of a geopolitical means of national citizenship as an intimate defense mechanism of their parental rights. Intimate geopolitics here helps to highlight emotionally rich and creative sets of practices informing strategies of survival and resourceful ways of living in the environment of competing citizenship regimes. This article offers a new perspective on women's narrated experiences of marriage migration and their negotiations of maternal rights. It shows that the intense fears of separation from their children prompt women to proactively use their national citizenship to secure their parental rights.

Marriage migration to Mainland China is a relatively new but quickly developing phenomenon changing the social fabric of Chinese society (Jeffreys and Wang 2013). A late-comer to the global marriage migration market on the receiving end, China has been primarily known and researched as a source of brides for more affluent destinations in Asia and the West. In the mid 2000s, women from China constituted the highest proportion of foreign wives in Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, where they became subjects of restrictive residency, work, and citizenship

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3 regulations (Chao 2004, So 2003, Jones and Shen 2008). Closed to immigration and  
4 international romance until the early-1990s, marriage migration to Mainland China  
5 became a focus of scholarly inquiries in the context of growing cross-border contacts  
6 and the emergence of contact zones for foreigners and locals in metropolitan centres.  
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8 Following on a notable yet under-studied trend of marriage migration since the 2000s,  
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10 there has been a growing popular interest in the women from the former Soviet Union  
11 as potential 'foreign brides.'<sup>1</sup> This has become a regular topic for national news  
12 coverage, TV drama productions,<sup>2</sup> and entertainment programmes.<sup>3</sup> Chinese bloggers  
13 and media recurrently comment that 'marrying a man from China' has become a  
14 fashionable trend among women from the former Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> In sharp contrast to  
15 the negative publicity around 'mail order brides' directed at the women migrating from  
16 Southeast Asia,<sup>5</sup> the majority of this media coverage has focused on the positive,  
17 progressive, and civilized character of Chinese-post-Soviet marriages.  
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21 Geopolitical aspects of international marriages have been examined in  
22 scholarship that drew attention to the structural injustices of spousal visa regimes  
23 (Innes and Stell 2015), state binary governing logics of drawing boundaries between  
24 foreignness and citizenry, private and public spheres, legal and illegal practices as well  
25 as 'fake' versus 'real' marital relations (Chen 2015, Friedman 2015). The twin  
26 analytical focus on marriage and migration therefore enables an analysis of the  
27 serendipitous effects of socio-economic and geopolitical forces on life choices and the  
28 emotional dimensions of mobility experiences (Mai and King 2009, Peterson 2016; see  
29 also Ní Mhurchú in this special issue for further discussion about the intersection of the  
30 emotional as attachments and mobility). Marriage migration is of particular relevance  
31 for geopolitical inquiry, because it highlights shifting geometries of power in the  
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47 <sup>1</sup> 'Foreign bride' (*wai ji xin niang*) is an established term in popular and scholarly discourses on  
48 marriage migration in China. It has strong connotations with human trafficking, illegal migration, and  
49 commodification of marriage (Shen 2012).

50 <sup>2</sup> At least two TV drama series were dedicated to Russian-Chinese romantic relations in the 2000s:  
51 'North-East Love Story' (2012), and 'My Natasha' (2012)

52 <sup>3</sup> *Xiang Qin Tuan* produced a series of forty short episodes entitled 'Love at First Sight' aired  
53 between March and June 2016 on the theme of Chinese-Foreign marriages focusing primarily on  
54 romantic relations between Chinese men and women from post-Soviet states, 8 May 2016,  
55 <http://www.le.com/ptv/vplay/24801873.html>.

56 <sup>4</sup> Shui Changong (2014) 'Why do Russian girls marry Chinese guys?' blog, 25 November,  
57 [http://www.360doc.com/content/14/1125/09/12361654\\_427856310.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/14/1125/09/12361654_427856310.shtml).

58 <sup>5</sup> Koshobekova, Nargiz (2015) 'Russian newspaper encourages Russian-Chinese marriages', The  
59 World of Chinese, 2 June 2015, [www.theworldofchinese.com/2015/06/russian-newspaper-encourages-russian-chinese-marriages/](http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2015/06/russian-newspaper-encourages-russian-chinese-marriages/)  
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3 contemporary global order, and opens up space for examining formulations, practices  
4 and negotiations of the preconceived norms and laws of marriage, family structures,  
5 gender relations, nationalism and citizenship (Constable 2003, Piper 1997). This article  
6 looks to a less-studied aspect of the emotional struggles involved in marriage  
7 migration, and explores how migrant women address and resolve their perceived  
8 uncertainty regarding their parental rights (see also Turner and Vera Espinoza in this  
9 special for further discussion about the emotional struggles linked to marriage  
10 migration). This article is particularly concerned with how migrant women negotiate  
11 their unstable role as a foreign wife in a hostile legal environment, which is  
12 complicated by traditional family values and gender norms in China.  
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20 My study of Chinese-post-Soviet marriage migration reveals the complexity  
21 and nuances of geopolitics cutting across socio-economic, political, personal,  
22 emotional, and gendered forces shaping migratory journeys. The women whose stories  
23 inform the analysis in this paper “freely” chose to marry and move to China; they did  
24 so for multiple reasons, and on their journey discovered and engaged with a complex  
25 web of intimate geopolitics (Harker and Martin 2012; Morrison, Johnston and  
26 Longhurst 2012; Pain and Staeheli 2014). Their voluntary decision to migrate and  
27 marry in China escapes easy categorizations and labeling, and should be understood in  
28 the context of an array of gendered structural and personal reasons. The term ‘intimate  
29 geopolitics’ here captures the inextricability of socio-political and economic structures  
30 and processes from intimate decisions and responses taking place in particular spatial-  
31 temporal contexts (Harker and Martin 2012, Peterson 2014, 2017). Migration decisions  
32 borne out of existing socio-economic pressures and gender ideologies and relations --  
33 that are impossible to disentangle<sup>6</sup> -- have geopolitical implications, as they are closely  
34 entwined with citizenship laws and immigration regulations that define the conditions  
35 for national membership. The emotional efforts and costs invested in the decision first  
36 to move and then to make a family life in China successful are inseparable from  
37 citizenship and immigration laws and changing gender relations and family norms in  
38 both sending and receiving societies.  
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53 The empirical focus on Chinese-post-Soviet marriages in this article disturbs  
54 the prevalent dichotomy between the West and its Eastern Others in analyses of  
55 globally intimate ‘gendered geographies of power’ (Pessar and Graham 2001, Klinke  
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59 <sup>6</sup> Säävälä (2010) makes a similar observation in her research with Albanian and Russian migrant women in  
60 Finland.

2016). Academic enquiries into globalization of intimate encounters have noted the predominant dynamics between women from the poorer societies of the global South and men from the affluent global North (Constable 2003). A focus on Chinese-post-Soviet marriages thus shifts attention from this dichotomy to interrogate how intimate geopolitics play out in the personal relations of those who normally take up the position of an Orientalized Other. The article acknowledges agency of migrant wives, and seeks to understand how post-Soviet migrant spouses negotiate and reconstruct their subjectivities in the spaces afforded to them at the interstices between citizenship, marriage, migration, and motherhood in China. The analysis draws on life stories (Atkinson 1998) recounted by thirty women who came to China from Russia and Ukraine between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s; they were at different stages of their married and post-married lives at the point of the interview, all of which took place between November 2016 and June 2017. Further interviews with staff at the Russian consulates in Beijing and Shenyang complement interpretations of personal narratives with the sending state's perspective.

My central argument is that post-Soviet migrant women in China are driven by their intense fear of separation from their children to use the conflicting character of citizenship laws to ensure their maternal rights. I develop the argument in four sections. In the first section, I discuss how the women look back on their migratory journeys and rationalize their decisions to move for marriage to China. The upheavals of the post-socialist transitions and their impact on the system of values and social priorities feature prominently in the narratives of escape and pursuit of better life opportunities. Post-socialist uncertainties, familial pressures and their desire for a better life contribute to their decision to move to China yet cannot be separated from the intimate forces of physical and emotional attraction that these women developed towards their husbands before embarking on the journey to China. The process of reinventing themselves in a new socio-cultural environment prompts re-evaluation of their life-worlds and norms of married life. For many, this process leads to what women call 'losing self', which is discussed in section two. The third section unpacks internal and external borders of the PRC's citizenship regime by detailing how patriarchal structures in the new immigration law exclude migrant spouses from Chinese citizenship yet embrace their children into the national collectivity. The realization that their children born in China automatically assume Chinese nationality produces among many women an acute sense of vulnerability and the fear of forced



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3 separation from their children. Section four explores how women redefine and exercise  
4 their agency as a foreign wife despite an uncertain future for foreign spouses' legal  
5 status in China; this is accomplished by arranging for the children to inherit her home  
6 national citizenship for the child and/or informally arranging two passports. The  
7 fragmented character and inconsistent implementation of immigration laws and  
8 administrative regulations create spaces for the women's productive interruptions of  
9 national boundaries and reinterpretations of conflicting citizenship regimes.  
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### 19 **Entering Chinese marriage**

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22 We show that we are needless, that we marry for  
23 love, not for money. Chinese probably rejoice  
24 that they 'snapped' [us] free of charge (from  
25 conversation with Olya and Katya, 5 June 2017,  
26 Beijing).  
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32 The two main routes, often closely related, for increased personal contacts between  
33 China and the post-Soviet states since the 1990s have been mobility of Chinese people  
34 for business and education (Nyíri 2003) and, from the post-Soviet perspective, a  
35 growing interest in China, its language and culture across institutions of higher  
36 education leading to increased international study and student exchange opportunities  
37 in China. Most women who took part in this research met their future husbands in their  
38 hometowns or in China where they were on the Chinese language courses or  
39 educational exchanges themselves. In all cases discussed here, the decision to marry  
40 and settle in China was prompted by a period of romantic relationship, and sometimes  
41 pregnancy. The decision to settle in China, rather than in the woman's home country,  
42 was, in part, informed by the couple's or man's negative experiences of racist public  
43 attitudes that led to the conclusion that the life for them and their children would be  
44 easier in China. In looking back on their journeys to a family life in China, the women  
45 rationalized their decision through an interplay of economic, personal and social  
46 dimensions framed by the post-socialist transitions, and not having a better choice at  
47 the decisive moment. Although all the marriages in this study were 'free-choice',  
48 resulting from a period of romantic engagement, it was common for the women to  
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3 express that they felt objectified by the Chinese marriage culture, were not fully  
4 accepted by their Chinese family and struggled to adapt to their foreign migrant wife  
5 status in China.  
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9 The lack of fulfilling and promising job prospects, economic stagnation,  
10 isolated environment and depreciation of university qualifications in their home  
11 countries of Russia and Ukraine were among the most commonly mentioned  
12 motivating factors. None of the research participants mentioned that their decision to  
13 marry a Chinese man was prompted by their inability to find a husband in their home  
14 country. Rather, the main reason was physical attraction in combination with the  
15 values which the men represented in the women's eyes during courtship. Lena (38)  
16 went to Beijing in the early 2000s from Vladivostok to learn the Chinese language,  
17 hoping that it would expand her employment opportunities back in Russia. She stayed  
18 in Beijing after falling in love, having a child, marrying and subsequently divorcing her  
19 husband. Looking back at her marriage trajectory she recalled the feeling of isolation  
20 and stagnation in Vladivostok, and the opportunities that Beijing life promised. The  
21 visceral experiences of post-socialist upheaval (Humphrey 2002, Oushakine 2009),  
22 with no obvious routes out of the traumatic repetitions of post-socialist crises, were  
23 closely intertwined with Lena's and other women's decisions to seek an escape which  
24 the idea of marriage in China promised. For women from the Far Eastern and Siberian  
25 parts of Russia, the sense of never-ending sequels of post-Soviet economic disasters  
26 was exacerbated by the feeling of being disconnected from the European part of  
27 Russia. Many observed that going home in the Far East for them was closer, cheaper,  
28 and faster from China than from Moscow. Women from Ukraine also talked about the  
29 appeal of better future prospects as a precursor to their decision to marry and move  
30 with their Chinese husband to China. Alyona, a 38-year-old Ukrainian woman, had a  
31 successful career as a film artist in Kiev where she met her future husband on a film  
32 set. She then followed him to China. She observed that staying in Ukraine meant for  
33 her missing out on the opportunities afforded by the fast-developing economy and  
34 creative spaces in China. This was one among a host of reasons cited – a complex web  
35 of economic, socio-political, cultural, and personal factors that motivated the women to  
36 marry in China. Even in those cases where women started subsequently to financially  
37 support their natal families back home, it would be overly simplistic to attribute their  
38 migration to economic factors alone.  
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Despite freely choosing to move for married life in China, the feeling of having been (mis)led into the married life in China was commonly expressed: ‘Chinese bribe us into marriage’ was a sentence I recurrently heard in my conversations with Russian-speaking wives in China. ‘They are emotionally bribing us with their promises of a good life, constant presents, and attention,’ concluded Olya and Katya, two women married and living on the outskirts of Beijing at the time of our conversation in a Starbucks café in the Chaoyang district of Beijing; a place where they meet every fortnight to interrupt their domestic routine (5 June 2017, Beijing). The women reported being seduced by the attention and care in which their future husbands enveloped them during the courting phase, treatment which they had never observed, expected or experienced from men in their home country of Ukraine.

Marriage remains the main societal norm and route to self-realization for a woman in the post-Soviet states, as it is in post-Mao China (Fang 2013). Women critically reflect on these aspects of their up-bringing and social environment: ‘They don’t value women in our countries. We are all brought up by mothers who say “thank you very much for taking my poorly brought-up, uneducated daughter to marry you. Thank you for marrying her, thank you that you will look after her”’ (Olya, Beijing, June 2017). The social and cultural value of marriage as the life-goal for a woman is further amplified by the familial and social pressures to marry ‘on time’. Having moved away from the economic, social, and familial pressures at home, the women encounter the commodifying effects of the Chinese marriage culture.

A particular trait of the reform-era Chinese society that sets it apart from post-Soviet marriage practices is the widespread custom of monetary exchange negotiated by the bride (or her family on her behalf) with the groom’s family. The Chinese family ‘corporate model’ founded and run primarily as an economic unit has been long observed and critically interrogated by anthropologists of China (Yan 2003: 3-4). The economic and labour exchange logic of the Chinese family structure is particularly notable when the contemporary practices of dowry and bride price are considered. The ‘bride price’ continues to be an ordinary and widely-practiced norm accompanying the establishment of a new family. With the growing ‘shortage’ of women of marital age, women in China turned into agents with more bargaining power, on the one hand, and a valuable commodity, on the other. The moral foundations and the revival of Confucian patriarchal values in recent years, fuelled by the negative impact of family planning policies and decades of extensive control over the bodies of women (Hillier

1988, Greenhalgh 1994, Judd 1994) further contributed to commercialisation of family relations in post-Mao China. For Chinese women and their families, it is common to receive a certain amount of money that the girl or her family receive as a result of marriage (the amount given to the bride depends on her household registration (*hukou*), her level of education, and family status)<sup>7</sup>. Historians, psychologists, and anthropologists have long observed the puzzling peculiarity and continuity of the Confucian patriarchal structures of dominance and inequality which survived historical and political upheavals and continue to underwrite China's political and economic orders (Bruckermann and Feuchtwang 2016: 40, Harell and Santos 2015: 33, Yan 2003: 149-150). Since the economic reforms of the late 1970s, these continuities have been altered by the changing social attitudes affected by the infiltrating rules of the market and individual striving for success (Yan 2003, 2013). The bride price custom is the result of the 'historical saturation' (Stafford 2013: 23) by Confucianism and fast-changing market influences on the moral landscape of family relations in China that, according to one of my interviewees, sounds bizarre to the 'European' ear or, in the words of another woman, is simply 'feudal' (20 August 2016, Beijing).

Several women blamed themselves for their lack of knowledge, and high adventurous spirit, expressing regret for not learning enough about Chinese traditions and mentality before embarking on the journey, and for not adapting to the Chinese way of life. 'They [Chinese] are not bad, we are doing them bad,' concluded Lena (Vladivostok, 16 August 2016). Olya and Katya concurred that 'we make a mistake that we show that we can do everything ourselves and don't need help' (5 June 2017, Beijing). In the process of negotiating their new 'Chinese wife' status, they struggle to accept and adapt to the cultural conventions of marriage in China. Some women found it uncomfortable and troubling to notice the social impact that their marriage had on the social status of their husbands among their peer groups. Alyona voiced this discomfort in her observation that 'Chinese men take pride in marrying a white woman, but, in reality, they don't need you'; to paraphrase, they flatter themselves by scoring higher symbolic capital and 'earning face' among their peer circle. She came

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, 'Forget dowries: Chinese men have to pay up to \$24,000 to get a bride', *The Quartz Obsession*, 9 June 2013, <https://qz.com/92267/in-a-reversal-of-the-dowry-chinese-men-pay-a-steep-price-for-their-brides/>, 'Tianjin fell off of the top three: the latest ranking of bride prices', 7 September 2017, [http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MjM5MjIxMjY3NA==&mid=2651502476&idx=1&sn=0dac25c4f8f608a4ca07793f25962047&chksm=bd57a4218a202d37c4e2ff7033e85fca9485b8b104ce6ac0a604c2c4b7e4d486bde45cb64891&mpshare=1&scene=5&srcid=1001vObstzwd3oGmda2AqYjw#rd](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5MjIxMjY3NA==&mid=2651502476&idx=1&sn=0dac25c4f8f608a4ca07793f25962047&chksm=bd57a4218a202d37c4e2ff7033e85fca9485b8b104ce6ac0a604c2c4b7e4d486bde45cb64891&mpshare=1&scene=5&srcid=1001vObstzwd3oGmda2AqYjw#rd),

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3 to a realisation that Chinese men do not chase white women in general but specific  
4 types, because ‘they have a serious inferiority complex and only choose accessible and  
5 affordable white women’ (Interview, Beijing, 20 August 2016). ‘Accessible and  
6 affordable’ here refers to the normative value attributed to the post-Soviet women who  
7 have not been emancipated by the developments in gender equality policies as the  
8 women in the West. Natasha similarly attributed her husband’s instantaneous decision  
9 to marry her to her European background: ‘We met two weeks before he was leaving  
10 Ukraine for China, and he decided straight away that he wanted to marry me. They  
11 don’t even think about it, particularly if it is Russian. I didn’t know before, but I realize  
12 now that it is their cultural peculiarity’ (Beijing, 5 June 2017).

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21 The women’s accounts of entering Chinese marriage should be understood in a  
22 broader context of China’s reform transformations and the shifting position of a white  
23 woman’s body in the Chinese national imagination (see also Daigle’s paper in this  
24 special issue which looks at the role of how the Cuban state regulates intimate  
25 relationships linked to national (re)construction efforts). In the early reform period, the  
26 white woman was conceived of as a distant object of consumption and a commodity, as  
27 a background or adornment of private sphere thrust into public displays of modern  
28 family life and domesticity. The white woman was an object of admiration, desire,  
29 longing, and the symbol of qualities which China lacked (Schein 1994: 147). As  
30 China’s economic growth and global influence become more confident, marrying a  
31 white woman fulfils at least two closely-related national goals. The first one is the  
32 rectification of the skewed sex ratio designated as a national security concern  
33 negatively impacting economic, social, and cultural aspects of Chinese society (Das  
34 Gupta, Ebenstein and Sharygin 2010). The tacit official preference for white women as  
35 foreign brides for Chinese unmarried men is apparent in the announcements made with  
36 the support of the Chinese state institutions. In March 2018, for example, *Global*  
37 *Times*, the Chinese Communist Party’s global mouthpiece, published an article  
38 suggesting that Russian-Chinese intermarriages are becoming part of the two  
39 countries’ closer cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative (*Global Times* 2018).  
40 In the heavily censored publishing environment, such formulation and content of the  
41 article could have only been published with the approval of censors. The second and  
42 goal, which is related to the first, is the national desire to become a powerful and  
43 respected world power with global influence epitomized in the PRC’s national strategy  
44 to fulfill its China Dream (Callahan 2017). The pursuit of this China Dream is  
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3 unequivocally tied to another reform-era goal: to increase the ‘quality’ of the Chinese  
4 population to make it fit for its global role (Greenhalgh 2010). In the context of these  
5 national strategy goals aimed at shifting China’s position in the global order, from the  
6 status of a developing state to a major player of global capitalism, it is not surprising  
7 that the Chinese state favours a growing number of white foreign wives. Historically,  
8 intermarriages played an important role as the Chinese Empire’s tool of alliance, or  
9 assimilation, with their neighbours (Teng 2013). In the contemporary context, a  
10 growing number of marriages with white women symbolizes that Chinese men become  
11 desirable husbands and reliable economically, socially and domestically. Favourable  
12 official and popular representations of such marriages work as an extension of the  
13 popular discourse of China’s rise as a great economic and political power washing  
14 away the shameful memory of China’s century of humiliation, and healing national  
15 insecurities that it engendered (Barmé 1995, Callahan 2004). Yet, the emotional  
16 struggles of the women who take up the positions of Chinese wives highlight the  
17 entrenched cultural attitudes to marriage, gender ideologies and ambiguous attitudes  
18 towards foreigners in the Chinese society.  
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### 34 **Losing self**

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36 I lost<sup>8</sup> myself somewhere, because in any case, it  
37 is a different culture, language, cuisine; your  
38 opportunities to realize yourself here are very  
39 limited (Katya, Beijing, 4 June 2017).  
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43 One of the biggest challenges for post-Soviet foreign spouses in China is to adapt to  
44 the cultural norms and socio-economic realities of family lives in a foreign context.  
45 Feeling fully accepted as a family member is challenging. Lena concluded that ‘in  
46 Chinese families we are always guests’ (16 August 2017, Vladivostok). In her  
47 observation, even if ‘they nominally accepted you into their family, you will never be  
48 truly close to anyone there’. Lena was recalling the time when her marriage was  
49 deteriorating, and she did not have anyone close-by to confide in: ‘I ran out of the  
50 house, and spent half a day in the park. I switched off the phone, and was crying there.’  
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60 <sup>8</sup> The original Russian word used here was ‘потеряла себя’ that literally means ‘lost myself’.

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3 In this situation, I just wanted someone to listen, feel sorry. I didn't have people like  
4 that in my house'.  
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7 When I probed whether she shared her problems with her family in  
8 Vladivostok, Lena said that she couldn't tell her mother so as not to upset her: 'Why to  
9 upset her? First of all, I am in a different country, married to a foreigner, she will  
10 worry for me. Secondly, I felt ashamed, because it was my choice after all. Many of us  
11 live like this without parents knowing much about our life. We don't know the local  
12 law, and even if we know it, we don't know how to use it, there is no one to protect us  
13 – our relatives are living far away. Not only we don't ask for help, we are ashamed of  
14 talking about it with our relatives' (Vladivostok, 16 August 2016). Natasha recalled the  
15 early days of her married life in China in a similar tone: 'At the beginning, I really  
16 wanted to go back to Ukraine. I didn't like China. I couldn't get used to it. Then, when  
17 my husband went to work abroad I entered a period of depression. I am here by myself;  
18 it was very hard. I had to get used to his family because I lived with them, had to get  
19 used to my life, to China, pregnancy, everything...' (Interview, Beijing, 5 June 2017).  
20 Katya found consolation and started developing coping mechanisms with the help of a  
21 psychoanalyst with whom she connected via Skype. Katya said: 'I simply started  
22 losing it. I want to work freely, but they don't understand why I need it. So it happens  
23 that you lose yourself. This is very hard, very hard. [The] psychotherapist helps me,  
24 and I noticed improvements, because at some point I just didn't want anything. You  
25 lose your own self to such an extent that you don't have any desires or interests. I can't  
26 call it depression; it is just complete indifference' (Beijing, 4 June 2017). Adapting to  
27 the realities of life as a migrant spouse is an exercise in tremendous emotional  
28 upheaval and mental adjustment which many women cannot cope with on their own.  
29 The topics of isolation, boredom, loneliness, and inter-cultural misunderstandings  
30 came up in every conversation. It is easier for women living in big cities with sizeable  
31 Russian-speaking communities, such as Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, to build a  
32 familiar social circle, although in some cases turning to a professional help and/or faith  
33 became the preferred way of redefining their sense of self. A number of women living  
34 in Beijing where a Russian Orthodox Church operates on the territory of the Russian  
35 Embassy became regular churchgoers after their move to China.  
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56 The difficulties with cultural and familial adjustments are complicated by  
57 China's current immigration regime that does not grant holders of family guest visas  
58 (Q) permission to work, and locks migrant spouses into a dependent position or pushes  
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3 them into the grey zone of illegal employment. The 2012 Exit-Entry Administration  
4 Law and 2013 Regulations on the administration of the 2012 law make it explicit that  
5 the work permit is issued to those foreigners whose 'labour should meet the needs of  
6 the socio-economic development of China' (Liu and Ahl 2018). The emerging  
7 immigration regime draws clear lines between visa categories: if you came to work,  
8 then work on a working visa; if you came on a family visa, then sit at home and look  
9 after children. Economic dependence on the husband's income is particularly difficult  
10 to accept for some highly-educated women who had been in the process of forging  
11 their own careers before they moved to China.  
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19 Alyona, who ran art workshops for Russian-speaking women and children in  
20 Beijing, shared that she was often overwhelmed by the feeling of sadness and loss,  
21 which she attributed to her dependent and tenuous status in China: 'I had occasional  
22 psychological meltdowns. From time to time there are moments when I feel like  
23 packing up and going home' (Interview, 31 May 2017, Beijing). She attributed her  
24 feeling of loss to her not having the right to work legally on a Chinese family-visitor  
25 visa. When we met Alyona's income was irregular and depended on the sale of her  
26 paintings and tutoring. Yet, she expressed a strong belief that for 'a modern woman' it  
27 was important to have her own income, not to depend on her husband, because if 'the  
28 husband provides for a woman completely, she becomes a slave. Even if he is a kind  
29 and caring man, not a tyrant, she depends on him' (Interview, Beijing, 31 May 2017).  
30 She went on to explain that most family conflicts with her husband were related to  
31 domestic finances: 'when I run out of money I naturally ask him, as he is earning quite  
32 well. And, because I spend his money, he feels that he has the right to blame me for  
33 spending more than I should have, and I react sensitively to this' (Interview, 31 May  
34 2017, Beijing).  
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47 The women of this study also commented on feeling stifled by administrative  
48 restrictions and cultural differences preventing them from being included in China.  
49 Natasha shared that she felt 'like a bird in a cage, without any choice. My freedom is  
50 very limited by all these political things, [so] I feel as if I signed myself a prison  
51 sentence' (Beijing, 5 June 2017). Natasha's recognition of her family life being closely  
52 bound up with the political structures that limit her ways of belonging in China echoes  
53 experiences of immigrant spouses in other contexts (Friedman 2015). Unlike the  
54 majority of these post-Soviet migrants, who typically stay in China on two-year family  
55 visas, Natasha received a Chinese green card in 2016 after being married to her  
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3 Chinese husband for five years, and recalled the lengthy troubles that she had faced  
4 securing the document. Yet, she questioned the card's worth: 'I even wrote a resume,  
5 why I would be useful in China.... I had to wait for the card for nearly two years. I had  
6 to get a certificate in Ukraine that I didn't have a criminal past. This certificate is only  
7 valid for one month. At the time, Orange revolution was unfolding in Ukraine. My  
8 father went through the barricades. He had to pay 1,000 USD in order to get this  
9 certificate, so that I don't appear in person. So, it cost me a lot of money and nerves to  
10 get this card. But I don't even know if it is of any use... For example, if I divorce my  
11 husband, what do I do with this card? Will they take it away from me? I don't even  
12 know about it' (Interview, Beijing, 5 June 2017).

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21 On the journey to married life in their adoptive country, women discover the  
22 commodifying features of marriage in China, gaps in cultural and familial norms, and  
23 imposed visa restrictions. When the birth of a child enters the horizon of family life,  
24 the acute awareness of the lack of recognition of the foreign mother's parental rights  
25 prompt some women to reinvent their subjectivity beginning with the  
26 acknowledgement of their vulnerable position as a foreign spouse in China.

### 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 **Acknowledging vulnerability**

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44 We ourselves get to such point in  
45 our family lives, humiliated, with  
46 a real possibility of not being able  
47 to see our children again (Lena,  
48 Vladivostok, 16 August 2016,)

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56 According to the PRC's Nationality Law (1981), a child born to at least one Chinese  
57 citizen parent on the territory of PRC automatically becomes a Chinese citizen.  
58 Furthermore, the Chinese state exercises a strict single citizenship regime precluding  
59 the children from becoming dual citizens. Since there is no clear route for an  
60 immigrant spouse to naturalise in China<sup>9</sup>, the ambiguity and incompatibility of her and  
her children's statuses in China are a source of considerable anxiety for the women

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<sup>9</sup> Although Chinese Nationality Law includes provisions for naturalization of close relatives of Chinese citizens, the conditions for meeting the required criteria are very high and difficult to meet. Liu Guofu, China's influential immigration lawyer, has proposed to lower the required criteria for naturalization of 'foreign brides' in China (Liu 2019).

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3 once they become aware of possible problems through word of mouth, their own  
4 experience, or coincidental events.<sup>10</sup>  
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6 Chinese citizenship has external and internal borders constituted in parallel and  
7 in relation to each other. On the outside, the Nationality Law clearly defines who the  
8 Chinese citizen is and outlines a single citizenship regime; internally, the household  
9 registration system (*hukou*) complements this citizenship architecture by placing  
10 citizens into the categories of rural and urban populations, distributing education and  
11 healthcare provision, social rights, and assigning normative positions in accordance  
12 with their place of registration and the ethnic category they are assigned to (Jakimow  
13 and Barabantseva 2016). A birth certificate is issued at the hospital where the birth  
14 takes place, yet the child's citizenship status is not complete until s/he is written into  
15 the *hukou* system, at which point the child becomes a full Chinese citizen.  
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Sasha has lived in Changchun since 1996 when she moved there from Moscow  
with her Chinese husband and their two daughters. She met her husband while working  
in a Chinese restaurant in the suburbs of Moscow. Sasha gave birth to their third girl in  
Changchun, where she lived with her three daughters at the time of our first meeting in  
2016. Her husband had been working in Guangzhou for several years now and came to  
visit them once a year during the Chinese New Year. The only reason she had not  
sought divorce, she told me, was because of her fear that the husband would not let her  
keep their younger daughter: 'He would give her to his sister, or the wife of his older  
brother. He will not look after her. Why would I want it?' (Sasha, Changchun, 8  
August 2016). The older two daughters were already of age and worked independently,  
although they continued to live with their mother. Sasha was shocked to find out that  
her daughters were Chinese citizens, a fact she discovered when the Chinese  
authorities refused to put Chinese visas in their Russian passports. Their Russian  
passports became defunct in the eyes of the Chinese officials, because they had already  
had Chinese citizenship and did not require a family visa for their stay in the country.

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<sup>10</sup> The restrictive domestic legal environment for foreign spouses in China is further aggravated by the absence of the international legal framework to resolve international family disputes over the custody of children, since the PRC (with the exception of Hong Kong and Macao) is not a signatory to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. The PRC is a signatory to the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 8(2) stipulates that 'where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity'. However, because the loss of the second citizenship of the Chinese national child is legally prescribed by Chinese nationality law, the deprivation of an element of the child's foreign identity would not be considered illegal.

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3 Sasha suspected that her husband had registered their daughters in the household  
4 registration (*hukou*) system without letting her know. This had probably occurred, she  
5 stated, when they were going through a difficult period in marriage and he worried that  
6 she would go back to Russia with the children<sup>11</sup>. She added: ‘Chinese men are very  
7 worried about it. I know three women whose husbands took children and don’t let them  
8 see their mothers. The women had to leave China, and their children stayed behind. I  
9 know three women like this’ (Sasha, 8 August 2016, Changchun). For women of the  
10 post-Soviet upbringing with a growing influence of Russian Orthodox culture, their  
11 child belongs to them, and they find Chinese men’s (and by extension their families’  
12 and wider society’s) attitudes towards children surprising and infringing on their  
13 maternal role. In the words of one research participant, ‘where I come from [Ukraine]  
14 the new-born baby is her mother’s child, while in China the child belongs to the  
15 society’ (Yaroslava, Shanghai, 21 June 2017). Lena arrived in Beijing almost ten years  
16 after Sasha and learnt by chance of possible legal difficulties after becoming a mother  
17 in China:

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19 I got pregnant, and we started planning to register our marriage. I  
20 went to the Russian embassy in Beijing for advice. I told them that I  
21 wanted to marry a Chinese citizen and that I was pregnant. There  
22 was a female member of staff who stripped off the rosy glasses I was  
23 wearing at the time. She told me about the story of one girl who had  
24 given birth to both her children in China and registered them both as  
25 Chinese citizens. When things didn’t work out and it was time to  
26 divorce, the husband took the children to a village in the countryside  
27 and the mother did not see her children again. And she advised me:  
28 ‘Go home, give birth there, and register the child as a Russian  
29 citizen. Give birth in Russia and then come back and register your  
30 marriage in China. Her words as if woke me up from my dream, and  
31 I did as she said (16 August 2016, Vladivostok).

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33 When Lena’s marriage did not work out several years later, she recalled her  
34 conversation with her former husband: ‘He started asking me to give my son to him.  
35 You don’t need son, he told me. You are 40, you still need to marry. This is his

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<sup>11</sup> Citizenship rights and welfare provisions in the People’s Republic of China are administered through household registration (*hukou*) system which recognizes its member as a full Chinese citizen with a particular socio-economic and ethnic status. Passports in China are intended for foreign travel rather than domestic use.

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3 Chinese mentality. He was even offering me money so that I leave our son with him'.  
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5 Lena attributed this prevailing thinking to the long-lasting effects of family planning  
6 policies in China and the continuities of traditional marriage values that treat the wife  
7 and her children as the property of the husband's family. Despite being the product of  
8 the market-oriented socialist government, the family-planning policy revived  
9 traditional Confucian attitudes to marriage in unexpected ways (Davis 2014). Having  
10 restricted most women to having only one child, it became an unwritten norm for a  
11 woman to leave the child with the father's family in case of divorce, because she could  
12 marry again and have another child.  
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19 With no independent sources of income, temporary dependent residential status  
20 in China and no reliable legal support, it is common for women to seek extra assurance  
21 of their parental rights through arranging their home country's citizenship for their  
22 child. The main advantage of this passport for their children for women living in China  
23 is that, if needed, they can quickly leave with the child to their home country.  
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### 31 **Engaging citizenship**

32 I am glad my daughter has a Ukrainian  
33 citizenship, just in case. I will never let her  
34 come out of the Ukrainian citizenship. It is  
35 probably because I am not hundred percent  
36 sure (Natasha, Beijing, 6 June 2017).  
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41 Although the Chinese state is embracing a seemingly pragmatic, managerial and  
42 flexible approach to governing foreigners (Pieke 2012), including the call to hire more  
43 foreigners in public office in its global competition for human talent (Yan 2016), the  
44 administrative mechanism is lacking transparency, clarity and consistency. The state is  
45 actively adapting to the mutations and challenges of maintaining a single citizenship  
46 regime against the backdrop of increased migration to and from China. The domain of  
47 marriage migration exposes the limitations and tensions in the Chinese governing  
48 framework of citizenship and family relations, and the interplay of emotions and  
49 geopolitical structures shaping the post-Soviet wives' decisions asserting their parental  
50 rights. Their emotional state of uncertainty and 'unspoken fear' (Ho 2009) of  
51 separation from their child prompts migrant women to employ their national  
52 citizenship as a defense mechanism to secure their parental rights. Their maternal  
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3 subjectivity prompts them to redefine their relationship with and value more their  
4 home citizenship.  
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6 From the conversations with the women and Russian consulate staff, it emerged  
7 that until the mid 2010s, the Chinese authorities eagerly issued Chinese visas in the  
8 foreign passports of mixed children, and the children could reside in China on the same  
9 one-year and later two-year family visa as their mother. Polina, a Beijing-based  
10 research participant, considered herself lucky that she had successfully persuaded her  
11 husband to apply for their son to abandon Chinese citizenship in order to become a  
12 Russian citizen against the pressure from the local authorities and the Chinese family:  
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14 I wanted extra assurance. When I was pregnant, I heard many bad stories  
15 about divorces, and awful stories that women were kicked out, that  
16 children were taken away or stolen, and that they did not have anywhere to  
17 go. Leaving Chinese citizenship wasn't very difficult in the early 2000s.  
18 Now it is more difficult... When my husband took our request to the local  
19 immigration office, the people told my husband off as a child: "are you a  
20 fool or something, why did you give away your child's citizenship? Our  
21 country needs clever people, you have to think about our race!" He was  
22 standing there blushing. (Beijing, 31 July 2016).  
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36 The local immigration officer's comment is illustrative of the widely held opinion  
37 about the role that social reproduction and children play in the idea of continuing and  
38 reviving the Chinese race and nation. Indeed, in August 2018 a *People's Daily*  
39 editorial identified having more children as a national concern.<sup>12</sup> Polina considered her  
40 marriage happy and had full trust in her husband who had pursued her for several  
41 years in her home town in Russia. Yet, she felt she needed an extra layer of certainty  
42 that her son could never be taken away from her. In the absence of the foreign  
43 spouses' secure legal status in China, passing on the woman's national citizenship to  
44 her child assures her of her parental rights yet compromises the child's Chinese  
45 citizenship. Without *hukou* registration, the child is considered half-citizen, and as  
46 such afforded limited rights and responsibilities. Such a child can enjoy certain rights,  
47 such as residing in the country without a visa, yet, at the same time, has limited rights,  
48 such as access to education. S/he can't go to any public nursery or school, because not  
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<sup>12</sup> Zhang, Yiqi 'shen wa shi jia shi ye shi guo shi', *Renmin Wang*, 6 August 2018  
<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0806/c1001-30210179.html>.

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3 every school accepts children without *hukou* registration. Polina observed that her  
4 Chinese parents-in-law had been particularly upset to find out about their grandchild's  
5 change of citizenship, because his prospects to pursue a career in civil service or  
6 Chinese army would be limited. Several women made the decision concerning their  
7 child's citizenship in secret from the Chinese family after learning about the past  
8 negative experiences of other women. By securing the link between mother and child's  
9 bodies through the mother's national citizenship, the women activate the internal  
10 boundary of Chinese citizenship, preventing the child from becoming a full Chinese  
11 citizen, yet securing a stronger legal bond between herself and the child. Women  
12 actively seek ways to outwit China's single nationality law to assure their parental  
13 rights and give more citizenship flexibility to their children. Alyona from Ukraine  
14 managed to play the contradictions of national citizenships to her and her child's  
15 advantage and arranged two passports for her child. Yet, she admitted that this was  
16 risky and one of the citizenships could be revoked at any time.

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18 During the interviews some women and diplomatic staff voiced the opinion that  
19 Chinese local officials had been instructed not to issue Chinese visas in foreign  
20 passports of children from mixed marriages so that these children had to remain in the  
21 territory of China. Having observed this issue for several years, one Russian consulate  
22 staff member developed an impression that the Chinese state was trying to 'keep' the  
23 children as Chinese nationals. Women expressed similar suspicions at the intuitive  
24 level, exacerbated by real uncertainties about their legal status and restrictions to work  
25 openly in China. Staking a claim to their home country's citizenship for their children  
26 at the expense of Chinese *hukou*, or finding a way to informally arrange dual  
27 citizenship for the children are ways of exercising national citizenship to secure a  
28 maternal bond to their Chinese national children in a limited space and constrained  
29 rights afforded to foreign wives in China. As permanent foreigners in the Chinese  
30 nation, women are pressed to play the limitations of citizenship regulations to secure  
31 their maternal bond and pacify their intense fear of separation from their children.

### 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 **Conclusion**

56 Historically, citizenship and immigration laws have been drawn by states on behalf of  
57 families and communities (Jones and Shen 2008, Harker and Martin 2012: 768). The  
58 Chinese marriage experiences of the post-Soviet women and their negotiations of  
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3 parental rights and their children's citizenship show how their foreign status and  
4 challenges of adaptation to the Chinese cultural and familial norms heightens their  
5 citizenship awareness, albeit in terms of the fear of being separated from their child. In  
6 carrying on with this expression of sovereign rule, the Chinese immigration regime in  
7 its current form is closer to the pre-revolutionary variants of Chinese citizenship norms  
8 than to contemporary versions of citizenship for foreign spouses as practiced by other  
9 immigration states, including China's neighbours with similar family norms.<sup>13</sup> In  
10 preventing foreign spouses from a route to full citizenship, the Chinese state continues  
11 the Chinese imperial strategy of ethnic acculturation by excluding foreign women yet  
12 embracing their mixed-race children into the Chinese cultural sphere. The journey  
13 women embarked on to their married life and motherhood in China unleashes not only  
14 tremendous emotional efforts of cultural readjustment, but also stimulates an  
15 awakening of their national citizenship consciousness in unexpected ways. Caught in a  
16 complex web of intimate geopolitics that is informed by the legacies of post-socialist  
17 transformations in their home countries and China, and continued inequalities  
18 entrenched in Chinese marriage norms, and patriarchal ideologies in both societies and  
19 their immigration laws, the post-Soviet women actively negotiate their position in the  
20 limited spaces afforded to them. In the absence of legal recognition of their  
21 participation in the Chinese society, and scarcely trusting the political system to respect  
22 their parental rights, they resort to other resourceful ways to secure their children's  
23 citizenships and their maternal rights. The value of passing on a mother's national  
24 citizenship to the children takes on a particular significance as a guarantee of the  
25 woman's parental rights, thus securing a route of possible return to the home country  
26 for both mother and child. Thus, national citizenship becomes an intimate defence  
27 mechanism to assert women's maternal rights and subjectivity in case their pursuit of a  
28 married life in China comes to an abrupt end.

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<sup>13</sup> South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan have a large number of foreign spouses constituting the largest segment of their foreign-born population. They have made provisions for a clearly delineated route to national citizenship with economic, social, and political rights for migrant spouses.



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