

Editorial

# Title Transnationalism and Genealogy: An Introduction

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**Abstract:** Transnationalism and genealogy is an emerging subfield of genealogy. The field has witnessed a significant growth in the last two to three decades, especially in the areas of transnationalism and family arrangements, transnational marriage, transnational adoption, transnational parenting, and transnational care for elderly parents. However, large gaps remain, especially with regard to the impact of transnationalism on lineage. Articles in this Special Issue fill some of the gaps. Additional research is called for.

**Keywords:** transnationalism; genealogy; transnational marriage; transnational adoption; transnational parenting; transnational care; lineage

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Since the Call for Papers for the Special Issue on “Transnationalism and Genealogy” was announced last summer, all the manuscripts that were submitted, peer reviewed, and accepted have now been published. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my laconic assessment of the subfield of transnationalism and genealogy, situate the published articles of this Special Issue in the field, and point to directions for future research in this field.

## 1. Transnationalism and Genealogy as an Emerging Subfield

The modern English term “genealogy” may be traced to the Middle English word “genealogie,” which may originate from Old French, Late Latin, and Greek. Together, “genea” (generation, descent, family) and “logy” (study) mean the study of family lineage or pedigree. Genealogy is as old as the human history. Genealogy started with an oral tradition and evolved into written family records. As an academic discipline, genealogy began in approximately 1500 ([Encyclopedia Britannica 2019](#)). In contrast, transnationalism as a new approach to the study of international migration is still in its nascence as it was introduced by anthropologists Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton in the early 1990s, most systematically in their seminal book *Nations Unbound* published in 1994. However, since then the literature on transnationalism has seen geometric growth, and “transnationalism” has become a buzz word in many fields including, but not limited to, anthropology, sociology, political science, history, and so on.

Transnationalism is classically defined by [Basch et al. \(1994, p. 7\)](#) as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” This classic definition of transnationalism has met with some challenges by other scholars (see, for example, [Portes et al. 1999, p. 219](#)). Along the line of Portes and his associates, I define transnationalism as the processes in which immigrants as well as their social institutions engage in regular and sustained involvement in economic, political, social, cultural, or personal practices across national borders ([Yang 2006](#)). The conscious endeavor to intersect transnationalism and genealogy is however very much lacking. Transnationalism can be a very fruitful and instrumental approach to the study of genealogy.)

Essentially, the mission of the subfield of transnationalism and genealogy is to examine the relationship between transnationalism and genealogy. The impact of transnationalism on family

relations, family history, and family lineage across the globe ought to be at the center of the subfield. Many topics will naturally fall into the domain of this subfield. An inexhaustive list will include at least the following: The impact of immigrant transnationalism on family relations; the role of immigrant transnationalism in writing or rewriting family histories; the effect of immigrant transnationalism on family lineage; the role of transnational marriage in transnational family dynamics; cross-border intra-ethnic, interethnic, and interracial marriages and bloodline; the role of transnational adoption in transnational family relations; transnational adoption and lineage; the prevalence of transnational families; transnational family arrangements; transnational motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood, and their differences from traditional motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood; transnational childrearing practices; transnational healthcare; effects of migration policies on transnational families; contexts in the countries of origin and destination, and decisions on transnational family separation or reunification; transnational migration and familial naming practices; and new horizons or insights brought by transnationalism to the field of genealogy.

## 2. Where We Are and Where We Go from Here

As an emerging field, transnationalism and genealogy has seen a significant growth in the last two to three decades, often intersecting with family studies, anthropological research, and sociological research. However, large gaps in the literature remain. This section highlights some significant themes and suggests pathways to move forward.

### 2.1. Transnationalism and Family Arrangements and Relations

Transnationalism has reshaped family structure and relations. Transnationalism has created transnational families whose members are separated in different nation-states but sustain close family ties across borders. Existing studies have identified a variety of transnational family arrangements created by immigrant transnationalism including “astronaut” families (e.g., [Alaggia et al. 2001](#); [Aye and Guerin 2001](#); [Chee 2005](#)), “parachute kids” (e.g., [Hamilton 1993a, 1993b](#); [Zhou 2009](#)), and left-behind children by transnational parents, mostly mothers ([Dreby 2007, 2010](#); [Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997](#); [Parreñas 2001](#)). In astronaut families, the family head (called “astronaut”), typically the father, stays in the home country and/or travels to multiple countries while the spouse and children live in the host country. Parachute kids are minor children whose parents reside in the homeland but who attend schools in the host country alone or are cared for by relatives or legal guardians, caregivers, or landlords. Left behind children are those who stay in the home country often with grandparents or other relatives but whose parents migrate to the host country. More recent studies reveal another phenomenon dubbed “satellite babies,” who were born to young Chinese immigrants or students in the United States and Canada and were sent back to China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong for care by mostly their grandparents, or sometimes other relatives, for an extended period of time, ranging from several months to several years ([Bohr and Tse 2009](#); [Wang 2018](#)). These satellite babies typically reunite with their parents after the family has achieved financial security or when they have reached school age. These new family arrangements have impact on family relations and family members, especially children. What needs to be researched further is how prevalent or typical these transnational family arrangements are, or whether these patterns only occur to a few select immigrant groups, and if so, why. Research on children left behind by fathers is very limited, albeit existent ([Parreñas 2008](#); [Pribilsky 2012](#); [Schmalzbauer 2015](#)). The analysis of parachute kids is largely descriptive in nature, and in particular, the long-term impact of parachuting on these children calls for research.

### 2.2. Transnationalism and Lineage

In many societies, lineage was traditionally associated with ancestral land. In some Asian societies such as China, lineage was tied to ancestral hall, collectively owned ancestral land, and a genealogy ([Zheng 1992](#)). Some studies have demonstrated how Chinese diaspora, especially

business elite or *huashang*, helped revive or construct ancestral land, ancestral properties (e.g., school, cultural center, science building), ancestral organizations, and genealogy for lineage members (Song 2008). Nevertheless, research on transnationalism and lineage is very thin. Theorization about the relationship between transnationalism and lineage and a systematic empirical analysis of the effect of transnationalism on lineage are cried for.

### 2.3. Transnational Marriage

In the age of globalization, transnational or cross-border marriages have become increasingly common. Many transnational marriages, including “mail-ordered brides,” today often involve women of the poorer and less developed global south to the richer and more developed global north, a phenomenon dubbed “global hypergamy” (Constable 2005). Despite country-level differences in the level of economic development, some of these cross-border brides from developing countries have a higher socioeconomic status in terms of education and occupation than their husbands in developed countries (e.g., Oxfeld 2005; Thai 2005). Some of these brides are less marriageable domestically because they are divorced, too old (e.g., over 30), too educated, or too successful. Some hope to escape the constraints of local patriarchal marriages and to have a modern marriage abroad. Some desire to have an easier family lifestyle than in the home country. All of these could lead to expected or unanticipated outcomes in the marriages and family lives. While there is a significant amount of research on how transnational marriage has shaped family relations, including imbalance of husband-wife power, division of labor within the household, marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction, risks, vulnerabilities, tensions, abuses, termination of marriage, and even health problems (e.g., Charsley 2005; Freeman 2005; Ko 2012; Kudo 2016; Straiton et al. 2019; Wang 2007), the impact of transnational marriage on lineage remains a blank spot.

### 2.4. Transnational Adoption

Since the mid-1950s, transnational adoption has gradually turned into an institution and industry and gained popularity not only in the United States but also in Australia, Canada, and Europe. In the mid-1970s and 1980s, Korean adoption was the dominant source of transnational adoption to the United States. Since then, sources of transnational adoption to the United States have turned global (Condit-Shrestha 2018). Bulgaria and China have become the top source countries of adoption to the United States in recent years (Condit-Shrestha 2018; Yang 2011). Transnational adoption is an avenue to “the globalization of kinship.” Transnational adoption has profoundly changed the traditional concept of kinship and family relations. As Modell (1994) compellingly argued, it creates “kinship with strangers” by legally and practically severing genetic ties and inventing new family relations with biologically unrelated parties. Unlike domestic adoption, transnational adoption is often transracial. For adoptees, “family” is not freely chosen, and kinship is constructed by the global political economy and the nation-state (Kim 2007). Much has been written about transnational adoption, especially Korean adoption, and its impact on family relations, adoptee identity, racialization, citizenship, and well-being (see, for example, Dorow 2006; Kim 2010; Laybour 2018; Nelson 2016; Oh 2015; Pertman 2001). For example, Korean adoptees often report feelings between the races, cultures, and identities of their adoptive parents and their biological being, and they also feel the conditional acceptance within Asian communities and a lack of visibility in mainstream American culture (Laybour 2018; Nelson 2016). Nevertheless, there is very little research on the effect of transnational adoption on lineage.

### 2.5. Transnational Parenting

Transnational family arrangements have resulted in family physical separation between parents and children and entailed transnational parenting or childrearing across borders. The current literature has examined various aspects of transnational parenting practices and experiences. What is documented is that transnational parenthood differs from traditional parenthood in “parenting at a distance” or physical absence together with social presence, but transnational parenting roles in childrearing

are strongly gendered with greater expectations for migrant mothers than for migrant fathers (Dreby 2007, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001, 2005, 2008). Migrant mothers and migrant fathers also have differential influences on the experiences of left-behind children (Parreñas 2001, 2005). Transnational fostering could be part of normal lives in transnational families (Åkesson et al. 2012). The separation between migrant parents and children left behind could be long and indefinite especially when parents' legal status is an issue (Menjívar 2006; Schmalzbauer 2004). Beside sending remittances and presents and occasional home visits, long-distance, cross-border communication is very important for parent-child relationships. Migrant parents try to be socially and emotionally present in children's lives despite their physical absence. In spirit, they are both "here" and "there" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), but in reality, this is difficult to accomplish. The means of communication has evolved from letters to phone calls and to Skype, email, and Internet-based social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, WhatsApp) via computer, cell phone, and tablets in more recent decades. However, research on parent-child communication using more advanced technology remains very limited. The differential impact of children's age at separation from their parents on children's lives and especially their psychological development is seldom researched. Uniformly qualitative research at a small scale on this topic can be complemented by quantitative research.

## 2.6. Transnational Care for Elderly Parents

Globalization has led to an increase in occupational mobility with growing numbers of individuals seeking employment abroad. Life expectancy has continued to rise globally. Globalization and global aging, the two global processes, have given rise to the need of care for elderly parents in their home countries or caregiving across national borders (Dhar 2011). Anthropologists Baldassar et al. (2007) have done seminal work in this emerging field. Through their ethnographic work in nine immigrant communities in Western Australia, they demonstrate the transnational caregiving experiences and practices of Australian migrants and refugees who cared for their elderly parents in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and New Zealand. Transnational care can be realized through different forms, including migrant family members travelling back to the home country to provide care, care users travelling across borders to receive care, and care providers travelling across borders to deliver care (Baldassar et al. 2007; Gorfinkiel and Escrivá 2012; Yeates 2009; Zechner 2008). We have seen some growth in transnational caregiving literature in the last decade or so (e.g., Baldassar and Merla 2014; Bauer and Österle 2016; Gorfinkiel and Escrivá 2012). Nonetheless, overall research on transnational caregiving is still in its infancy. Data beyond anecdotes and a small scale of interviews and observation are very much needed. In particular, how to use modern communication technology in transnational caregiving deserves special attention.

## 2.7. Transnationalism and Writing/Rewriting Family Histories

Transnationalism necessitates writing and rewriting family histories from a new perspective. With the growth of transnational families in the age of globalization, it is important that we write family histories from a transnational perspective. It would be mistaken to assume that transnational families are aberrant, pathological, traumatizing, or detrimental for the family and children (Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). Family histories should reflect transnational family arrangements and relations, transnational lineage, transnational marriage, transnational adoption, transnational parenting, and transnational caregiving.

## 3. This Special Issue

This Special Issue of *Genealogy* represents an initial attempt to examine the relationship between transnationalism and genealogy. The five articles published in this Special Issue cover various aspects of transnationalism and genealogy from historical period until present, with perspectives from anthropology, sociology, history, and African studies.

Angellar Manguvo's essay "Emancipating the 'Kin beyond the Sea'" investigates the inherent link between transnationalism and the emancipation of black kinship in a macro perspective. She documents the reciprocal impact of diasporic Africans on the liberation of Africa from colonialism on the one hand and of continental Africans on anti-racism in the United States on the other at the turn of the 19th century. She cogently demonstrates that black Africans, whether in the continent of Africa, the United States, or elsewhere are kin who can trace their origins to black groups in Africa, and that the emancipation of continental Africans from colonialism and the freedom of African Americans from racism are intrinsically connected.

In a micro perspective, Haiming Liu portrays how the Chung family had transformed from a traditional family to a transnational family and how this transformation had changed its family relations and lineage. Using family letters and other archive materials as data, he traces the 4-generation genealogy of the Chung family from Zhandong (great grandfather) to Chunli (grandfather), Yitang (father), and Sam from Guangdong in China to America, spanning from the 18th century to the early 20th century. The study focuses on filial piety as a Chinese family cultural principle, equal inheritance of land among sons, and competitions and conflicts over family property among brothers. In telling the Chung family story, the essay sheds light on the complex Chinese family culture and family relationships among family members and the impact of migration and immigrant transnationalism on the Chung family's relations, lineage, and history. It is fascinating that the paper also covers how immigration changed the naming practice and father-son nominal relationship.

In the tradition of oral history, Jenny Banh tells an interesting story of her family's transnational migration across four nations-city states in four generations. Through the narrative of her own family history, she throws light on multigenerational transnational migration, transnational family arrangements, the impact of transnational migration on family relationships and family lineage, and contexts in the countries of origin and destination and decisions on transnational family separation or reunification.

In filling the lacuna of transnational caregiving literature, Dwaine Plaza and Lauren Plaza's article examines the role of social media platforms, and especially Facebook, in facilitating transnational care-chains in the Trinidadian diasporic community by using data from two online surveys and ten in-depth interviews with Trinidadian immigrants in Toronto, Canada. Their article contends and demonstrates that social media have become a virtual transnational bridge linking the Trinidadian Diaspora across borders and provided family members with a sense of psychological well-being. What is significant is that the paper shows how social media have transformed transnational care arrangements and transnational family relationships.

In examining transnational parenting or childrearing practices, Min Zhou and Jun Wang's essay compares the parenting of Chinese immigrants in the United States and Singapore with a focus on challenges and strategies for promoting children's education. The study detects similar parental expectations on, and strategies for, children's educational achievements among Chinese immigrant parents in both the United States and Singapore. Their approach of interaction between cultural strategies and structural factors, such as resources from host social institutions and family and ethnic social networks, is more convincing than a simple cultural explanation for understanding the success in boosting children's educational accomplishments.

All of these articles fit one or more areas of transnationalism and genealogy that need research. However, more studies are called for to fill the gaps. This Special Issue is only the beginning of research on this subfield and hopes to attract more valuable contributions in the years to come.

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