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To cite this article: Carlo John B. Arceo, Jixia Lu & Dongsheng Wang (21 Aug 2025): Self-care in transnational migrant households: body-mapping of stressors and care strategies of Chinese women stayers, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1369183X.2025.2547865](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2547865)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2547865>



Published online: 21 Aug 2025.



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Self-care in transnational migrant households: body-mapping of stressors and care strategies of Chinese women stayers

Carlo John B. Arceo ^{a,b}, Jixia Lu ^a and Dongsheng Wang^a

^aCollege of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University, Beijing, People's Republic of China; ^bDepartment of Psychology and Counselling, St. Scholastica's College – Manila, Manila, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, arguments on migration as a livelihood in rural China have focused on labour reallocation, household power dynamics, women's triple roles, and stayers' well-being. Wherein, care for the dependent population's well-being dominates empirical works. This paper explores the strategies employed by the wives of Chinese miners in Ghana who stay behind to cope with the stress caused by their husbands' migration. The data collection was conducted in January 2023 and produced nine body maps from women stayers in Shanglin County, Guangxi, China. Through body mapping, stayers articulated their physical and psychological stressors and self-care strategies. This paper critiques egalitarian liberal feminism by highlighting how gendered care ideology is deeply embedded in cultural norms and principles which underpin the gendered division of labour of men engaging in paid employment while women in unpaid care work, which neglects self-care. We argue that the destabilisation of household dynamics due to a spouse's outmigration does not necessarily lead to women stayers' autonomy; rather, it creates an ambivalent situation where stayers are often burdened and stressed by becoming *de facto* heads of the transnational household. In coping with these situations, stayers actively choose and utilise their care strategies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 February 2025

Accepted 8 August 2025

KEYWORDS

Care ethics; body-mapping; cultural norms; technologies of the self; feminism

Introduction

The interplay of labour migration, gender roles, and social ties influences stayers' well-being (Bastia and Haagsman 2020; Miller, Bascuñan-Wiley, and Busse-Cárdenas 2020; Wu and Ye 2016). In China and other Asian countries, migration scholars found various physical, social, and psychological stressors due to the huge responsibility migration places on stayers (West et al. 2021; Y. Koirala 2023; Wang et al. 2021). Women in traditional Chinese society are expected to care for household members, placing themselves at the bottom of care hierarchy (Wu and Ye 2016) and care provision is considered a moral obligation (Ye et al. 2013) for children and older persons (Hung 2023; Lu 2011). Majority of China's migration literature defined those who must take care of the household and farm as 'left-behind' and began understanding their critical issues (Xiang 2007; Ye 2018). However, other migration experts contested the term

'left-behind' as it implies a lack of power, choice, or agency. These people voluntarily stayed to perform reproductive and productive activities (Bastia and Haagsman 2020; Murphy 2021; Schewel 2020), thus not victims of somebody's outmigration (Haagsman and Mazzucato 2020). Though, Chinese scholarships used 'stayers' in some work (Murphy 2021; Xiang 2007; Ye 2018), 'left-behind' was still common. 'The left-behind' in Mandarin is 留守者 (*liushou zhe*), meaning 'those who stay and hold the fort' (Xiang 2007). In this paper, individuals who stayed exhibit an active role in taking care of and maintaining their households, community, and themselves. We will highlight the Chinese women stayers' indispensable role in the productive and reproductive activities in the migrant household.

Migration may benefit or impair women's autonomy. In feminist literature, personal and political autonomy has its competing debates. Howard-Hassmann (2011) states autonomous women prioritise relationships and their interests. Liberal feminists argue that women enjoy personal autonomy as a result of state intervention (Baehr 2021) and economic freedom (Dahlum, Knutsen, and Mechkova 2022) whereas socialist feminists contend that structural undervaluing of women's unpaid work limits freedom (Howard-Hassmann 2011). However, care ethicists view that liberal feminists' self-sufficiency ideals conceal dependency and caregiving's role in society (Held 2006). Conservative critics argue that liberal reformers produce more harm by undermining foundational institutions and norms (Muller 1997).

This article explores how the absent migrant body, specifically Chinese miners working in Ghana, produces structural burdens and affective forces in the lives of women who remain behind. The migrant body becomes an agent shaping the well-being, care responsibilities, and bodily practices of stayers. While physically absent, it remains symbolically present in the transnational household. We examine how women stayers use strategies of care within a framework shaped by Confucian traditions and Foucault's concepts of Governmentality and Technologies of the Self. We argue that women's agency lies not merely in resistance but in navigating duty, sacrifice, and self-preservation, which reframes debates on gender, migration, and care.

With this, we examine how traditional teachings influence contemporary women's self-care autonomy. To illustrate this, we present cases of nine rural Chinese women stayers who gained autonomy when their spouses outmigrated to Africa. Our paper focuses on stayers' stressors and self-care strategies to adjust to migrant bodies' long-term absence. We argue that women stayers are still bound to patriarchal cultural norms and principles that underpin gendered care ideology and division of labour; resulting in self-care neglect and ambivalence to the acquired autonomy due to their spouses' outmigration.

Care, self-care, and women stayers

Scholarship on left-behind spouses emphasises either victimhood or empowerment (Archambault 2010; Wu and Ye 2016), but this binary overlooks micro-level embodied strategies of care and resistance among stayers in patriarchal contexts. In rural China, while migration may grant women more autonomy, it also increases productive and emotional burdens, contributing to physical and psychological distress (F. Chen et al. 2015; Tong, Chen, and Shu 2019). Our research extends this literature by using body

mapping to interpret visually how women stayers conceptualise self-care amidst triple roles. The study builds on but also critiques assumptions that greater responsibility automatically leads to empowerment. Instead, we uncover a more ambivalent reality where autonomy is gained but often through self-exploitation.

Feminists claim that care ethics are the cornerstone of long-term relationships and address injustices such as gendered division of care, costs, and inaccessibility (Himmelweit and Plomien 2014). Individualistic paradigm believes care involves hierarchy and power (Tomkins 2021). Since women predominantly provide care, this individualistic-power discourse romanticises caring and disadvantages them socially, economically, and politically. Phenomenology of care (Vosman and Nortvedt 2020) captures embodied physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual memories in current care research (van der Meide 2020).

Maternal altruism and childcare offer a rich landscape for studying care dynamics, self-care, and mother's embodied caring experiences. Altruistic care is selfless, unconditional, spontaneous, and compassionate (Pettersen 2012) yet the carer might be exploited (Vosman and Nortvedt 2020). In contrast, mature care is relational and balances one's needs with those of others (Pettersen 2012). Parenting and caregiving debates often focus on maternal altruism for their children but the dynamics between carers and carees affect the well-being of both. With this, mothers must balance maternal altruism with self-care and discern between self-care and selfishness (Enright et al. 2022). However, maternal altruism's origins whether it is biological, cultural, or normative are unclear (Alger and Cox 2013; Enright et al. 2022). We argue that this gendered care ideology is rooted in Confucianism that governs the stayers' care strategies for others and themselves.

This paper examines Confucianism's social order and moral governance of women in connection to Foucault's Governmentality and Technologies of Power. Confucianism emphasises filial piety, hierarchy, and social harmony (He 2015). To analyse our empirical material we use Confucianism's 7 Lessons for Women (Swann 2001): Humility, Husband and Wife, Respect and Caution, Womanly Qualification, Whole-hearted Devotion, Implicit Obedience, and Harmony between Younger In-Laws. These teachings instruct women to submit to their husbands and in-laws, avoid social affairs that embarrass the family, prioritise family over themselves, and maintain their appearance for their husbands (Swann 2001). Women follow rules to fit in with society, most of which are related to their husbands and household. Contemporary East Asian societies still have these interdictions, although women's access to higher education (Hu and Yeung 2019), mass media (Kang and Kim 2011), and financial independence (Raymo et al. 2015) are changing them.

These teachings fit Foucault's concept of governmentality, that explains how procedures, institutions, and norms rule and regulate society (Li 2007). According to W. Lee (1995), Confucian teachings on rulers' responsibilities, education's role in moral development, and social rituals shape society's behaviour, attitudes, and relationships. Confucian power dynamics, which include hierarchical relationships, and women's moral virtues can be analysed with Foucault's Technologies of Power. Foucault's concept of Technologies of Power as productive and dispersed highlights how power operates via knowledge, discourses and practices that alter subjectivity and behaviour (Foucault 1980; 1988). We examine how Confucianism's 7 Lessons for Women

affect moral guidelines and social controls that govern social behaviour, relationships, and responsibilities toward women by applying Foucault's governmentality and power.

These Governmentality and Technologies of Power distressed the women stayers. We argue that they are not passive victims but have agency to act for their well-being. Foucault's Technology of the Self explores how individuals actively shape identity, behaviour, and subjectivity via self-reflection, practices and techniques (Foucault 1988). This research views care strategies as self-technologies that help them handle responsibilities, relationships, and well-being in the migrant body's absence. This care goes beyond self-strategies. Establishing daily rituals, finding social support, and engaging in emotional resilience and well-being activities are all strategies that help stayers deal with the long-term absence of their husbands – the migrant bodies. We classified *self-performed care*, *care from others*, and *care for the activity* as the Technologies of the Self; that is women stayers' active behaviours for self-care practices (Foucault 1988). Once self-concern is achieved, agency and autonomy are another form of Technology of the Self (Foucault 1988). Foucault's concept of self-care as a political act highlights how different care practices contradict traditional gender roles and expectations (Hutton 1988). We argue that Confucianism underpins gendered division of labour and care practices but women stayers try to employ their agency to cope with the situation.

Research context

This paper evolved from the Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) project, which examined the complex links between migration and inequality in the Global South. Our focus is on gender, poverty, and resource flow along the China-Ghana corridor. Shanglin County's economy relies on service (52.9%) and agriculture (33%), led by rice production, fisheries, and livestock. Migration as a livelihood sustained the Zhuang people. Most migrant households in Shanglin County are from two townships, nearly around 20,000 households in 24 villages. Since the 1990s, Shanglin County has developed a unique migration within China and started a migration corridor with Ghana in the 2000s, where male migrants participate in small-scale gold mining (Botchwey et al. 2019). The Ghanaian context, marked by fluctuating gold prices, weak labour protections, and periodic crackdowns on Chinese miners, introduces specific risks that reverberate in China (Aidoo 2016; Hess 2016; Nkrumah and Bekoe 2021). Women stayers, though geographically distant, are emotionally and psychologically entangled in these Ghanaian realities. Fears of arrest, violence, and exploitation in Ghana amplify stayers' emotional labour and compound their caregiving responsibilities.

Our 2021 MIDEQ survey indicated that stayers perform triple gender roles due to their spouses' long-term outmigration in Africa for gold mining. On average, 46.1% (245) of Shanglin County's migrant households' males will spend one to five years in Africa before returning. As *de facto* heads of the household, the stayers manage daily domestic affairs, including financial decisions, care for the children and parents-in-law, and help run the farm or family business, while maintaining community relationships. The stayers who assumed productive roles were burdened by this added responsibility while managing their households. Families in Shanglin have patrilocal culture, therefore majority of stayers live near their husbands' families. With this setup, parents-in-law and friends may assist with childcare or productive activities.

Methodology

Using a phenomenological approach combining body mapping and semi-structured interviews to explore how women stayers in Shanglin County, Guangxi manage stress caused by their husbands' migration to Ghana. Conducted in January 2023, the fieldwork involved nine women recruited through purposive snowball sampling (see Table 1). The team agreed that we were reaching saturation when we debriefed after the seventh participant. We added two participants to check whether it yielded new data. Data saturation occurred in participant nine. All participants are women whose husbands migrated to Africa for gold mining, except one whose spouse is in China for health reasons. On average, the participants' spouses have been in Africa for almost two years and have never been back. They are mothers with resident children. Participants were recruited via purposive snowball sampling and had to be wives of migrant gold miners. All participants are Zhuang ethnicity and aged 34–58.

Based on Gastaldo et al. (2012), we adapted body mapping to local culture and daily life (see Table 2). Sessions typically lasted just over an hour. Adjustments included replacing white paper, associated with death, with yellowish paper alternatives, and allowing participants to use symbolic images from the internet when hesitant to draw. Body mapping, although more commonly applied in health and trauma research in African and Latin American contexts¹ (Gastaldo, Rivas-Quarneti, and Magalhaes 2018), proved to be a powerful tool for eliciting complex and embodied narratives in rural China. This method enabled participants to externalise and reflect on their emotions and physical burdens, especially in a Confucian-influenced context where verbal expression of distress is often stigmatised (Yang et al. 2020).

Unlike traditional interviews, body mapping allowed women to communicate through symbols, metaphors, and spatial relationships (Gubrium et al. 2016; Lopes Heimer 2022; Tarr and Thomas 2011), offering insights into how they perceive and experience care and responsibility. For instance, Ms. Ying chose symbols and spatially positioned them on the body map (e.g. a house near her head to symbolise aspiration and mental focus). Visualising her desires, connecting her head to aspirations, provided a medium of articulation beyond verbal narration, enabling a performative expression of agency that was both imaginative and embodied. Similarly, Ms. Hua positioned a prominent emoji-like smile on the head area and wrote 'do your job, plain and simple.' During the interview, she acknowledged that despite life's challenges, she persists in smiling, and looking at the body map informs her self-care practices while maintaining the façade that everything would be fine. The visual method, juxtaposing a positive symbol with modest text,

Table 1. Study participants demographics.

Name	Age	Number of Children	Spouse's Migration Status	Duration of Spouse's Migration	Figure
Ms. Xue	35	1	Migrant	2 years & 1 month	1
Ms. Zhou	34	1	Migrant	1 year & 9 months	2
Ms. Yun	45	1	Migrant	3 years & 4 months	3
Ms. Hua	40	2	Migrant	2 years & 11 months	4
Ms. Tao	34	4	Migrant	2 years	5
Ms. Fai	58	1	Return Migrant	5 years	6
Ms. Ting	50	2	Migrant	3 years & 3 months	7
Ms. Bao	40	2	Migrant	1 year	8
Ms. Ying	49	1	Migrant	1 year & 6 months	9

Note: Pseudonyms are used for participants.

Table 2. Adapted strategy for body mapping process.

Body Mapping Process of Gastaldo et al. (2012)	Adjustments for this Research
Meeting 1: Introduction to body mapping A. Body tracing B. Migration journey Homework: Personal symbol/slogan Meeting 2 a. Personal symbol and slogan b. Marks on/under the skin c. Self-portrait Homework: Preparation of message to others Meeting 3 a. Message to others b. Body scanning for difficulties and strengths c. Support structures d. Drawing the future e. Participant's narrative	Instruction 1: Introduction to Body Mapping and Self-Experience (5 min) Instruction 2: Body tracing (20 min) Instruction 3: The life of a woman: personal symbol and slogan (10 min) Instruction 4: Marks on/under the skin (35 min) Instruction 5: Self-portrait (10 min) Instruction 6: Resilience and coping (5 min) Instruction 7: Body scanning (15 min) Instruction 8: Support structures (20 min) Instruction 9: Drawing the future (10 min) Instruction 10: Participant's narrative (10 min)
Final Exercise: Decorating	

revealed the conflict between emotional suppression and moralised care, an aspect that might not be captured with interviews alone. Body mapping's participatory and visual nature provided a platform for women to narrate their struggles and aspirations in a way that honoured their cultural values and communicative preferences. The artistic representation of their stressors and care strategies on life-size body maps (Figure 1) was elaborated during interviews.

As the paper's lead author, I am not fluent in Chinese, so the research team recruited two bilingual Chinese female postgraduate students, Qiuxiang Lin and Yunxin Wei, from the College's Development Studies programme. With these credentials, they could conceptually and contextually translate and interpret textual data. Squires (2009) stated that interpreters and translators are reliable if credentialed and involved in the entire research process. Their full involvement ensured interpretive fidelity. Interviews were machine-translated via DeepL. While DeepL provided a baseline understanding of participants' narratives (Takakusagi et al. 2021), we critically recognise that machine translations carry risks of semantic flattening, cultural simplification, or tone misrepresentation, particularly in metaphoric or emotionally charged expressions in Chinese (Long and He 2022). The research team discussed ambiguities and incorporated contextual interpretations to preserve the original affective and cultural meaning (see Table 3). Rather than viewing translation as a neutral conduit, we see it as a meaning-making process shaped by tools, users, and epistemological

Table 3. Translated data verification process.

Version	Transcription/Data
Original Chinese Transcription	他们在那边赚钱得整天对着机器啊，也很辛苦。那边法律不像我们这边这么好，抢劫会直接杀人的。
DeepL Translation	They have to make money there to look at the machine all day, but also very hard. The law there is not as good as our side, robbery will directly kill
Verified Translated Data	Their work is hard and requires long hours, and the law there is worse than in China. They may rob my husband and kill him

positions. This reflexivity enhances transparency for readers and offers insights into methodological challenges in multilingual qualitative research.

Visual and textual data were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method with triangulation to ensure interpretive consistency with Rose's visual analysis (Gastaldo et al. 2012). It should be noted that we did not psychologically analyse the body map but we did consider the context in which it was produced, the preceding events, the symbol's arrangement and location, the colour and its meaning, the participant's metaphorical and literal meaning of symbols, the body map's intended audience, and their narratives. Body mapping helped participants convey culturally resonant symbols (e.g. numerology, colours, metaphors) and locate physical and emotional distress on their bodies. After the visual analysis, the thematic interview data were used to expand and interrogate the visual narratives that helped interpret symbolic elements from the body maps. These representations enriched the analysis of how stayers negotiate caregiving responsibilities, emotional burden, and self-care in the absence of their migrant spouse.

Ethical approval was granted by China Agricultural University's Science and Technology Department (201904811210506), with a Medium Risk rating. A letter of endorsement from the College was also shared with research participants and village officials. Participation was voluntary and anonymised. When one participant experienced emotional catharsis during body mapping, we applied non-maleficence principles, offering a listening space in lieu of clinical intervention or referral, given the stigma around mental health in rural China (Xu et al. 2022; Yang et al. 2020).

Personal and cultural symbols

Most of the stayers' body map symbolisms involved numbers, colours, imagery, and placements. From tracing the body map, picking colours and numbers, drawing or selecting images, and writing their messages on the canvas, these symbolisms represented their stayers' life experiences. Colours and symbols have cultural or personal connotations. This meaning is usually shaped by prior experiences or societal norms and culture (Shanneik and Sobieczky 2023).

Chinese numerology believes numbers may predict fortune or demise. The Chinese homophony underpins most Chinese superstitions. Number 6 (六, pinyin: liù) is associated with luck due to its similar pronunciation to 'smooth' (溜, pinyin: liū); whereas 8 (八, pinyin: bā) is pronounced similarly to 'get rich' (发, pinyin: fā). Number 4 (四, pinyin: sì) is considered inauspicious as it is a homophone of death (死, pinyin: sǐ) (Dossymbekova et al. 2015). Two participants (Figures 1-4 and 6) used Chinese hand gestures for six when asked how they would draw their hands. Ms. Hua runs her milk tea and rice pastry business at two locations while householding. Ms. Fai, the wife of the return migrant, cares for her grandchildren and her parents-in-law. Both want a happy, wealthy life for their families, despite the role differences.

I want my hands like number six because I hope my life will be smooth ... I'll use blue, just like the sky's colour after raining to represent my hope for a smooth life. – Ms. Hua, 40, Figure 1-4

The five central colours in Chinese culture are white, red, black, blue, and yellow. These colours reflect Chinese social ideology. Black symbolise power, misfortune, and evil. Modern culture favours black clothing because of its slimming effect. White is for

innocence, integrity, and honesty. White is also associated with death and mourning. Red, the most prominent in Chinese society, symbolises festivity, warmth, life, and vitality. Blue symbolises calmness, purity, and renewal. Yellow, the imperial colour, symbolises power, dignity, and hope (S. Chen and Chu 2022). Red, blue, and black were widely used by stayers during body mapping. Apart from cultural colour connotations, stayers associated red with physical pain.

Black because we immediately think of writing in black. The sense of order – Ms. Hua, 40, Figure 1-4

Red represents that my desire will be successful – Ms. Xue, 35, Figure 1-1

Most of the images they chose to represent their roles and experiences are from modern society, such as robot (Figure 1-3) and superheroine (Figures 1-2 and 8) for working tirelessly, cash for financial prosperity (Figures 1-2 and 7), and sunflowers for optimism and happiness (Figures 1-3, 5, 8 and 9). Most are influenced by popular media, such as superheroine symbolism. Two stayers noted that superheroines have unimaginable strength and endurance to overcome adversities, just like they endure their triple roles. Chinese society's desire for a prosperous family also explains the cash symbolism. Two stayers included this symbolism in the body map because they seek financial stability for their business. This challenges gender norms that men should work and women for domestic affairs. To depict her busy schedule operating her fried chicken store, Ms. Zhou used a panting dog (Figure 1-2). She said her business and children have kept her busy since her spouse migrated. The dog metaphor has meaning in traditional and modern China. Traditional Chinese metaphors depict dogs as subservient to their masters, symbolising ministers' connection with the imperial family (狗吠非主).² Modern pop culture uses 'overtime dogs' (加班狗) referring to someone who works tirelessly, often as self-mockery by corporate workers (Hatalová 2007). Dog analogies have evolved and become nuanced, but they still connect to society's power structure.

Choose that image of a dog breathing heavily and put it in my hands. I put my hands like that just how I cook fried chickens to sell. – Ms. Zhou, 34, Figure 1-2

Interpreting body parts

According to Foucault's (1988) *Technologies of the Self*, to care for oneself one must know themselves. One stage to care for oneself is embodying one's thoughts and feelings in congruence with their body. The nine stayers emphasise their hands, head, and heart when embodying their bodies. The stayers linked these bodily parts to their triple roles as women. Stayers' bodies and parts have navigated Chinese society's sociopolitical and economic landscape. Visualising these bodily parts helped them comprehend how essential their body is to them as stayers. Defining stayers' identity were hands for work, mind for thoughts, and heart for feelings (Figure 1).

Eight of the nine stayers said they needed their hands to perform their productive (Figures 1-2, 3, 7, 8), reproductive (Figures 1-1, 5, 6, 8), and social roles (Figures 1-4, 8). These stayers used their hands to care for the household, livelihood, expand their social network, and reminder of their goals via hand number signs (previously discussed). Ms. Bao struggled to manage the family hardware business, customer relations, and householding; when her spouse was in China, both serve as support system. Three

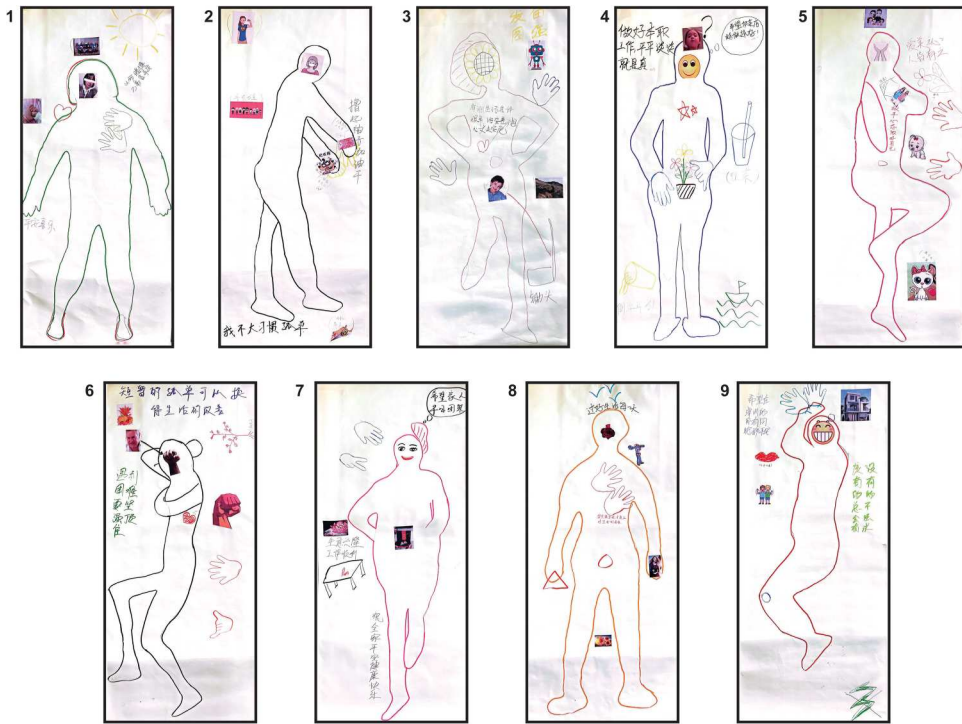


Figure 1. Nine stayers' body maps.

stayers drew their hands connected to their arms. Six drew on other areas of their body or canvas because of personal and cultural connotations they associate with hands. Ms. Xue (Figure 1-1) used a black marker to draw her hands over her heart; a reminder not to develop a bad personality and degrade others even if she succeeds. As discussed, Chinese colour theory connoted black as evil.

I'll use black to draw my hands and over my heart as a reminder not to have a black heart. I don't want to look down on people when I get rich. – Ms. Xue, 35, Figure 1-1

Stayers consider the head as a space where they express their family's vision and goals, especially for their children. A spatial representation of properly performing their roles. Apart from this, they associated beauty in the head. The stayers' symbolism and motto are in this space as a façade that they show to society. With a relationship issue with her spouse since migrating, Ms. Tao wrote her slogan as 'to look better, dress up a little, and take care of myself' (爱美之心人皆有之) in front of her face, emphasising the importance of woman's appearance (Figure 1-5).

I want to put 'Do your job, plain and simple' beside my head as an indication that it came out from my head. – Ms. Hua, 40, Figure 1-4

You have to look beautiful if you want to be attractive, the first thing that comes to mind is the face therefore I put the slogan there. – Ms. Tao, 34, Figure 1-5

The stayers' emotions are related to the heart as an embodied space and symbol. Three have used the heart to represent their negative or positive family sentiments (Figures 1-1,

6 and 8). They utilised this area as a reminder to be kind-hearted and optimistic to overcome life's adversities. This space is also for symbols or slogans about their family and themselves, to remember their lived experiences by heart. (Figure 1-1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8). With a spouse in Africa for over 2 years, Ms. Xue drew a heart on her shoulders as she feels responsible for maintaining her 4-year-old child's transnational bond with her husband. Since her child seldom saw her spouse, she showed him photos because of the time difference challenge.

I drew my heart on my shoulders because I want to carry the responsibility of maintaining the relationship between them so they will not be aloof from each other. Because I feel like my son starts to forget his father. – Ms. Xue, 35, Figure 1-1

I put it where the heart is because one should remember to be strong and optimistic so that they can cope with life's difficulties. – Ms. Bao, 40, Figure 1-8

Physical and psychological challenges

The stayers spatially located the physical and psychological discomfort that lived in their bodies and stored in their memories. They find it difficult to convey their physical pain in body mapping. Some of them presented their physical suffering with a red circle inside their body outline (Figures 1-3, 8 and 9). Mild discomforts include fatigue, flu, muscle pain, and dizziness, whereas severe disorders include cholera, stomach ulcers, and lumbar disc protrusion. Their spouses' migration to Africa exacerbated these discomforts that developed from their several roles. Ms. Bao marked her pelvic area with a red circle (Figure 1-8). She stated she developed lumbar disc protrusion due to strenuous and busy activities as a mother and business owner since her spouse left. Her mother-in-law is too old to help with childcare. One year before her spouse departed, Ms. Tao got a stomach ulcer in 2021 (Figure 1-5). She skips meals to wake up early to care for her school-aged children, manage the family, and do farm work for extra income.

Managing the business alone is hard, but with two people helping each other, it will be easier. He went to work to improve our lives. However, that increases my responsibility. – Ms. Bao, 40, Figure 1-8

Most participants are aware of their physical distress, which impacts their activities, but one decided to situate her discomfort outside of her body. Ms. Hua explained that a question mark would represent her hypoglycaemic condition and be placed outside opposite her head (Figure 1-4). She is aware of her condition but cannot describe how it impacts her and does not consider it a significant health problem.

Since childhood, I've had low blood sugar. I don't know how it affects my life. My doctor suggested I needed more sunlight. I normally consume candies or milk tea when symptoms appear. Intense labour causes dizziness, therefore I don't overwork. – Ms. Hua, 40, Figure 1-4

Most stayers worry about fitting society's beauty standards. Some participants worry about their weight and figure, and maintaining a presentable and optimistic face. The symbolisms are sunflower, rose, smiley, and a cute kitten, and colours such as pink, red, and black.

I'm out of shape because I worry too much. It is okay to be fat but I cannot be fat. – Ms. Yun, 45, Figure 1-3

There is no physical discomfort, but being alone with four children is hard. My husband shows no care for me, so I am considering changing. Look better, dress up, and use red lipstick to be more sophisticated. – Ms. Tao, 34, Figure 1-5

I'll use black for my body silhouette as it can resemble being thin. – Ms. Zhou, 34, Figure 1-2

The stayers were able to endure their triple roles and most of them tend to disregard their physical discomfort. They compare their comfortable situation in China to their husbands in Africa to face the demands of a stayer. They are also motivated by their children, as discussed later. This psychological conditioning helps them cope without their spouse and perform as *de facto* head of the household. Ms. Fai said she could only imagine his husband's five-year life in Africa, with its labour-intensive work and security risks. Her husband always told her that life is hard and she must be strong for the family.

Physically and emotionally tired. I must be strong because my husband works hard in Africa. It gives me strength whenever I think of him. I hope he could make more money to improve our life and return soon. – Ms. Fai, 58, Figure 1-6

China and Africa are different, we are happier here. He occasionally told me that I often complain that life at home is full of hardship. Hearing his stories, it is worse in Africa. – Ms. Yun, 45, Figure 1-3

Five stayers maintain transnational family relationships. They remain awake late at night in China to be able to talk to their husbands, about 1:00–2:00 AM,³ adjusting to Africa's time difference. In addition, they consider their spouses' work time off. WeChat⁴ is the main method stayers and migrants communicate. Some weekends, they use WeChat video calls. Even if stayers talk to their spouses, many worry about their husbands in Africa based on online news from social media.

It is quite hard to manage the feeling of loneliness even if we call each other through video – Ms. Zhou, 34, Figure 1-2

Their work is hard and requires long hours, and the law there is worse than in China. They may rob my husband and kill him. – Ms. Yun, 45, Figure 1-3

Three stayers worry about their children's welfare, well-being, and future. When her child is sick, Ms. Xue tends to neglect her health. She said that when they both got the flu, she concentrated on her child, making sure he took his medications, ate well, and performed sponge bath. Despite not feeling physically uncomfortable, she said it was exhausting to do it alone.

When your child is sick, you feel nervous, not sick. Even if you're unwell, you'll focus on the child. – Ms. Xue, 35, Figure 1-1

Besides the lack of physical help for child-rearing, Ms. Xue said her husband's long absence affects their child. She stressed the father-child bond because she has a boy. She tries for her toddler not to forget his father (previously discussed), but he looks for him when seeing other children's fathers.

If the child is safe, it's okay to be alone. If the child is sick or suffers an accident, I think 'If only he were at home, I would not face this situation alone.' For instance, it will be easier if the father drives the child to the hospital. Additionally, the child will lack fatherly affection. Other dads purchase gifts and take their children to play, yet mine will ask 'Why is my father not back?' – Ms. Xue, 35, Figure 1-1

Ms. Hua becomes impatient when her child is unwell and vents her worry and mood bursts to others. She stated she hoped she could simply remove her child's agony and illness.

When your child is unwell and you constantly worrying about them, it's difficult. I worry a lot and get furious easily. Stress causes a bad temper. – Ms. Hua, 40, Figure 1-4

Ms. Tao had a relationship problem with her spouse before migrating. She said they rarely spoke and that her husband no longer wanted her. She stated that her spouse went to Africa in the hopes of paying his CNY 200,000⁵ (USD 28,329) debt but only remitted CNY 2,000 (USD 283) months later. She is concerned about how to support her four children because they are dependent on her father-in-law's business.

My husband just went to Africa and sent me only CNY 2,000. That won't buy the child's milk. He became irate and said not to contact him since he's broke and owed money. I didn't contact him and didn't get any money in the following months. He believed I had someone else. – Ms. Tao, 34, Figure 1-5

Two stayers were emotional during body mapping. Ms. Tao's fetal body silhouette showed her psychological discomfort (Figures 1-4 and 5). Physical or mental acute distress drives fetal position (Lokko and Stern 2015). Their mental well-being suffered from solely raising their children, supporting financially their families, and their spouses' lack of emotional and financial support.

Social networks for care

Stayers appreciate their community because they unconditionally support their distress. The heart (Figures 1-3 and 5), hand (Figures 1-8 and 4), and head (Figures 1-1 and 9) were the body maps' vital parts; thus support system symbolism was placed there. Two stayers seldom discuss their issues with others. Ms. Zhou (Figure 1-2) shared her message 'I'm not used to being alone' (我不太习惯一个人, 很孤单) and put it under her feet stating that loneliness is often hidden. All stayers live near their parents-in-law and get along with them. Some older parents-in-law may support the stayers, but not all. However, those who can help focus on childcare. Ms. Tao's in-laws financially and emotionally support her. About 200 metres from Ms. Ying's residence is her parents' house; thus, she adjusted well when her spouse moved to Africa. She said she still eats at her parents' residence.

My in-laws are nice even if my husband and I don't get along. My sister-friend invited me to Nanning for a short holiday. My in-laws took care of their grandchildren while I was away. I was like their own daughter. – Ms. Tao, 34, Figure 1-5

Businesses are hard to maintain. I can tackle life's issues alone, but business need support. I may need to employ personnel. – Ms. Bao, 40, Figure 1-8

Prioritisation of care for others and the activity, and relationship with the self

In body mapping data, stayers show maternal altruism, sacrificing more for family. To support their household, they exploit their bodies. Three stayers neglect themselves while their children are unwell. Because their children give them internal motivation, stayers' body maps show children photos. In addition, stayers maintain transnational

household harmony with their husbands and children. Finally, they work to augment their husbands' remittances and meet household's needs.

Before I had a child, I solely thought about myself. I changed my mind after having him and prioritised my child first. If I had CNY 100, I would spend CNY 99 (USD 14) for my son and CNY 1 (USD 0.14) for myself to survive. – Ms. Xue, 35, Figure 1-1

'Every day we need to roll up our sleeves and work' is so true for me. We must survive, maintain the household, and eat. I must do this. – Ms. Zhou, 34, Figure 1-2

But despite self-exploitation activities, stayers employ physical and psychological health precautionary activities. Simple activities like sleeping, eating, drinking, and dressing properly. Most stayers trust Chinese traditional medicines (Figure 1-7) above Western medicines. They know which traditional medicines and teas are beneficial for them. Most stayers realise the body requires rest and care. Their body silhouettes and statements illustrate it. Two stayers lay down to show how they sleep and said their husbands' migration made living more comfortable (Figures 1-6 and 9).

I have no major illnesses. I take vitamins and get a CNY 160 flu vaccine annually. I go to bed whenever I want to, get up, and eat noodles outside." – Ms. Ying, 49, Figure 1-9

I want to change, look better, and take care of myself. Being more open to change makes me comfortable with myself." – Ms. Tao, 34, Figure 1-5

Lying makes life more comfortable. This is my sleeping position." – Ms. Fai, 58, Figure 1-6

Stayers depict psychological resilience through their life's philosophy, symbols, and messages to fellow stayers. These symbols and written messages remind them and fellow stayers to confront life's adversities. Ms. Fai described herself as a plum blossom since she believed this tree could survive the cold winter as she did. Sunflowers are a recurring symbol of stayers' happiness and comfort (Figures 1-3, 8 and 4). It makes them happy and reminds them to be optimistic. Like a superheroine, they feel they can be a stronger woman for themselves and their family by being optimistic (Figures 1-2 and 8).

My slogan is 'a short moment of solitude can lead to a better life'. I'm trying to stay strong until my husband returns home so we can live better. – Ms. Fai, 58, Figure 1-6

I wrote my message to other stayers in my heart because I also want to remember it ... 'need to be stronger and more optimistic so that they can cope with various difficulties of life.' – Ms. Bao, 40, Figure 1-8

The findings of the body mapping uncovered an interplay of personal and cultural symbols and the meaning of body parts that reveal the physical and psychological challenges of the stayers. The social networks of care highlighting the prioritisation of others over oneself has been significant. Our findings illuminate the delicate balance between caregiving responsibilities and nurturing one's well-being.

Discussion

Technologies of the self vis-à-vis lessons for women

The migrant's experiences in Ghana, the risks, working conditions, legal vulnerability, and remittance flows, directly affect the emotional and physical burdens experienced

by the stayers. Late-night calls timed to Ghana's working hours, economic anxieties over irregular remittances, and stress from sensational news about violence all underscore how destination context is embodied within the origin household. In this way, care and stress are co-produced across borders, emphasising the bidirectional flow of affect and obligation. This paper analysed the body maps and interview data through the Confucian ideals, particularly illustrating the gendered expectations for women, and Foucauldian technologies of the self, by showing how stayers shape their subjectivity through practices like grooming, symbolic affirmations, and bodily discipline.

The stressors of Shanglin women stayers could be rooted in imperial Confucian ideals for women, which prioritise the performance of reproductive obligations (Swann 2001). Transnational householding makes them neglect themselves, putting their health at risk. Maternal altruism drives their sacrifices for their children's success and well-being. Their husbands' outmigration destabilises established gender norms, and they compensate by performing more reproductive and productive activities, in some circumstances, seeking support. Although their roles cause physical discomfort, most stayers consider their reproductive roles as an obligation and their productive roles as a burden. For instance, Ms. Zhou symbolised her triple role as 'overtime dog', a metaphor that evolved from traditional to modern culture, and combined with the phrase 'roll up your sleeves and work harder', located near her clenched fist. During the interview, she clarified that she adopted the phrase from President Xi Jinping's speech⁶, which serves as a reminder to be resilient, even if she does not always concur with societal norms; she must meet expectations. This expression of inner strength is not simply personal determination, it is influenced by Confucian principles and concurrently resonates with Foucauldian technologies of the self, wherein the stayers internalise bodily discipline to embody a 'respectable' wife and mother. The relationship between political discourse and bodily discipline emerged clearly through the triangulation of visual and narrative accounts, demonstrating that women's position in the politics of care is still disregarded in the hierarchy (Tomkins 2021; Wu and Ye 2016).

Beyond challenges, our findings illustrate how women stayers exercise agency through self-care strategies that are simultaneously embodied, relational, and practical. For instance, Ms. Tao reported reasserting control over their physical appearance through dress and grooming, framing it not only as emotional uplift but also as a deliberate stance of self-recognition and personal strength. This reflects a Confucian ethos of appearance as virtue, but also enacts a Foucauldian technology of the self, self-fashioning to maintain stability and dignity in the face of absence.

In the cases of Ms. Bao and Ms. Xue, they leveraged financial control over family businesses to gain partial economic autonomy. Ms. Xue's financial agency allowed her to outsource some care tasks (e.g. child bathing) and save for her child's education. Conversely, Ms. Bao explained that '[m]anaging the business alone is hard ... [which] increases [her] responsibility.' These statements show that financial responsibility becomes a means of ethical self-cultivation, while grounded in traditional family roles, they reflect a Foucauldian practice of self-fashioning through prudence and moral accounting. At the same time, their financial control does not negate gendered burdens. It is deeply embedded in Confucian norms of female sacrifice and care. This reflects a shift in power within the household. These stayers expressed pride in their ability to sustain household income and described these roles as a source of fulfilment,

despite the increased pressure. Stayers balance these responsibilities with their bodies. Finding solutions to increase one's well-being requires awareness of feelings and needs. Foucault explained self-care as activities performed for the self, by others, and for others and activities to achieve one's goal of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, and immortality (Foucault 1988).

The study found that stayers use their bodies to perform technologies of the self, which influence and oppose governmentality with its technologies of power. Stayers identified internal and external care strategies, and we categorised these into: *Self-performed care* involves using their bodies to relieve physical or psychological discomfort; *Care from others* by seeking physical or emotional support; *Care for the activity* by dedicating their body to perform roles as a mother and wife. *Self-performed care* included health maintenance routines (e.g. traditional medicine, sleep regulation), symbolic resilience (e.g. writing affirmations or drawing empowering symbols), and restructured family interactions to maintain bonds. *Care from others* involved seeking emotional support from in-laws or community members, while *Care for the activity* manifested in the women's commitment to household and livelihood tasks, not just out of obligation, but out of intentional perseverance. This study's stayers' lived experiences show that women maintain household harmony, supporting prior findings (Wu and Ye 2016; C. Wang and Tang 2020). These acts, while not always framed as resistance, show how women appropriate the migration context to define forms of self-preservation and negotiated autonomy. Thus, while this paper documents the physical and emotional tolls of transnational separation, it also foregrounds how women redefine caregiving, toward themselves and others, not only as labour but as a dynamic and intentional practice of endurance, control, and dignity.

Stayers are subtly resisting Chinese traditional gender ideals and conform to the evolving modern autonomous women who take care of themselves. This study supports Enright and colleagues (2022) claim that unconditional support and caring are altruistic yet exploitable (Vosman and Nortvedt 2020). While most stayers follow the 7 Lessons for Women, others are deviating from this Technology of Power by taking care of themselves. Stayers are reshaping *Humility*, *Womanly Qualification*, and *Wholehearted Devotion* using various Technologies of the Self. Even though protecting the household is important, most stayers appreciate their social circle for emotional support, reshaping traditional women's expectations to stay at home, and avoiding shame (*Humility & Wholehearted Devotion*). Shanglin County has seen decades of international migration, so stayers have the technologies or knowledge to support new stayers by sharing their lived experiences and motivation to take care of themselves and their household.

Stayers felt burdened by having full autonomy over the household's economic resources. Stayers solely managed the household's finances, an unfamiliar acquired obligation because of their husbands' outmigration. This sudden shift of responsibility as *de facto* head of the household over economic resources overwhelmed most stayers since they had to take full accountability for financial resources and, for some, their business. Though this role was a result of their husbands' outmigration, it shapes how Chinese society regards modern woman as competent and able to manoeuvre in the productive space, compared to traditional woman's modesty (*Womanly Qualification*). Stayers' modern strategies deviating from Confucian virtues can be observed in some East Asian societies (Hu and Yeung 2019; Kang and Kim 2011; Raymo et al. 2015). Shanglin

stayers are simultaneously negotiating new roles, such as becoming *de facto* heads of the household, and sustaining community ties; thereby engaging in Technologies of the Self that challenge patriarchal culture.

Contemporary formal institutions do not require Confucian teachings towards women. However, its influence on Chinese society led to several imperial dynasties that embodied this philosophy for centuries. Ancient Chinese women's moral code, the 7 Lessons for Women persists today. Ancient China institutionalised this Technology of Power through books and formal classes. Over time, this philosophy was embodied and became the instrument for Governmentality, influencing women's behaviour in a hierarchical society. The 7 Lessons for Women have guided Chinese women's morality and how they should treat others and their bodies for centuries, including Shanglin women stayers.

Our findings demonstrate how Confucian virtues are not only ideational but embedded in women stayers' bodily practices and daily routines. For example, Ms. Fai positioned a plum blossom near her head and wrote 'a short moment of solitude can lead to a better life', explaining that enduring the most challenging circumstances is inevitable for stayers, like her, to eventually enjoy living with her entire family in the future. The flower imagery, when viewed alongside this narrative, conveys a quiet longing for a complete family, yet remains future-oriented and strategic. Stayers' self-regulation through beauty rituals or bodily sacrifice for the family reflects implicit obedience and whole-hearted devotion. These were not simply rhetorical links. Women stayers invoked family expectations and ideals of humility and endurance that mirror Confucian precepts. However, these ideals were not uniformly experienced.

A more critical engagement reveals that Confucian influences intersect with, and are at times reshaped by, other sociocultural forces. For example, older participants, such as Ms. Fai (aged 58), often emphasised sacrifice and deference, while younger women like Ms. Zhou and Ms. Tao (both aged 34) were more likely to frame self-care, such as dressing up and managing finances, as a form of resistance or modern identity. Younger women's practices of self-care can be seen as modern care strategies, but also as moral self-disciplining acts rooted in culturally inherited notions of female responsibility.

This broader framework cautions against treating Confucianism as a monolithic or timeless structure. Instead, we view it as one among multiple normative systems shaping gendered conduct and moral imaginaries. Technologies of the self, in this context, do not oppose Confucian norms outright but selectively appropriate or reinterpret them. This resonates with other traditional societies where moral expectations underpin gendered ideology (Archambault 2010). This dialectic underscores the ambivalence of autonomy; it is both enabled and constrained by the structures of tradition and power.

Our research challenges the care, gender, and migration understandings in two key ways. First, by adopting body mapping as a method, we move beyond verbalised accounts to access embodied experiences of care, showing how stress, sacrifice, and aspirations are inscribed on women's bodies. This methodological approach captures the sensory and symbolic dimensions of caregiving and reveals how women simultaneously perform, resist, and reinterpret gendered expectations. Second, we critique the liberal feminist assumptions that increased responsibility inherently leads to autonomy or

empowerment. Instead, we reveal an ambivalent autonomy that is forged through self-exploitation, silence, and emotional endurance. Care in our study is not only relational but politically and morally regulated, shaped by Confucian norms that bind women to the household even as migration disrupts traditional gender roles. This complicates prevailing narratives in migration literature and situates our findings within a broader feminist critique of moral economies of care in transnational contexts.

Conclusion

Our article examined how Confucianism's 7 Lessons for Women and Foucault's Technologies of Power and the Self shaped women stayers' gendered division of labour and care ideology. Confucianism as a Governmentality and 7 Lessons for Women as a Technology of Power influence how stayers actively use Technology of the Self. These women use their bodies and daily practices to perform self-care, expressed through three strategies: *self-performed care*, *care from others*, and *care for the activity*. Their body maps symbolically and textually illustrate a pursuit of happiness, defined not as individual liberation but as securing a healthy, harmonious, and prosperous family.

Stayers balance self-care with the reproductive, productive, and social responsibilities, often viewing caregiving not as exploitation but as a meaningful part of family life. The long-term absence of migrant husbands shifted gender roles, placing increased responsibility on women in reproductive and productive decision-making, distinguishing Shanglin's migration phenomena from other regions of China. While this burden is substantial, it also reshapes power dynamics within the household and enables women to perform *mature care* using three care strategies.

By conceptualising care as both an individual and collective practice shaped by Confucianism and transnational pressures, we exposed the embodied paradoxes of agency and subjugation. Self-care practices, expressed through health routines, symbolic acts, and emotional resilience, allowed stayers to manage their triple roles and subtly challenge gendered expectations that confined them. Yet, this agency remains ambivalent, often achieved through overwork, emotional suppression, and physical neglect. Our findings offer a nuanced critique of liberal feminist claims about autonomy and empowerment in contexts of migration and call for greater attention to the interplay between moral ideologies, embodied practices, and structural conditions. This research contributes to feminist migration studies by reframing stayer agency not as a departure from care, but as a recalibration of it under shifting global-local conditions.

Despite operating in a conservative sociocultural climate, women stayers' resilience and resourcefulness alter the structure of care politics. Their interdependence with others affirms the centrality of dependency in feminist ethics. These women are not passive victims, but situated agents who deploy care strategies to manage hardship and assert a form of embodied autonomy within enduring power hierarchies.

Notes

1. See works of Devine (2008), MacGregor (2009), and Wienand (2006) Sweet and Escalante (2015), Gubrium et al. (2016), J.P. Lee et al. (2016), Lopes Heimer (2022), and Shanneik and Sobieczky (2023).

2. English translation is ‘Dogs don’t bark at their owners’. In imperial China, several dog metaphors reflect the power dynamics between the authority and its subject.
3. The time difference between Ghana and China is 8 h; while Cameroon and China is 7 h
4. WeChat is a mobile APP in China that is mainly used as messaging and video/voice call platform.
5. Average exchange rate in 2023 was CNY 7.06 to USD 1. Our 2021 survey found that average financial remittance of Shanglin migrants is CNY 10,000 (USD 1,417) per month under typical production conditions.
6. The speech was made during the 2017 New Year celebration (https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-12/31/content_5155320.htm).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the convenors, discussants, and participants of the Migrant Body Writeshop held in December 2023 in Manchester, and the three anonymous reviewers of this article; your comments improved the content of this article.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Carlo John B. Arceo**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Jixia Lu**: Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Dongsheng Wang**: Data curation, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund under Grant ES/S007415/1.

ORCID

Carlo John B. Arceo  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-0416-7876>

Jixia Lu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8371-5583>

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