

Transnational Connection as Resource or Constraint: Gender and Origin Disparities in the Sense of Belonging among Foreign Professionals in Mainland China

In Mainland China, where permanent residency and citizenship remain structurally difficult to attain, foreign professionals' sense of belonging (SoB) is increasingly constructed through everyday social practices and transnational connections (TC). This study investigates whether TCs function as psychological resources or social constraints. Using 2023 respondent-driven sampling (RDS) data from Guangzhou and Shenzhen, we disaggregate TCs into instrumental, practical-local, and symbolic-digital ties. Findings reveal significant origin-based and gendered disparities. First, origin-oriented ties positively correlate with SoB only for professionals from developed countries (North-South migration); for those from developing origins (South-South migration), only local connections are salient. This suggests 'cosmopolitan capital' facilitates a synergy between transnationalism and integration unavailable to more precarious migrants. Second, a 'virtual contact paradox' emerges: frequent digital contact with the homeland is positively associated with SoB for men but negatively for women. For female professionals, digital transnationalism often facilitates family surveillance and reinforces domestic expectations, hindering adaptation. These results highlight the need for a shift from 'one-size-fits-all' talent policies toward nuanced inclusion mechanisms addressing the specific social and gendered burdens of transnational living.