



LEARNING THE “LANGUAGE” OF MOTHERHOOD AS INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS: A POETIC ETHNOGRAPHY

Kuo Zhang

University of Georgia; Western Colorado University
kuozhang91@gmail.com

Kuo Zhang is a lecturer in Teacher Education at Western Colorado University and a PhD candidate in TESOL & World Language Education at the University of Georgia. Her research interests include poetic inquiry and arts-based research in education, linguistic anthropology, and intercultural discourse studies. Her poems have appeared in various publications.

Abstract/Artist Statement: As international students seek degrees in U.S. institutions of higher education, their role as students is forefronted and recognizable by faculty and peers. However, what often remains invisible are international students' social and personal experiences during academic study abroad. Although there is a great deal of feminist research on academic identity and motherhood, almost nothing has been written regarding the experiences of international women who become mothers while pursuing graduate studies in the U.S. This poetic ethnographic study focuses on the lived experiences of eleven international graduate student first-time mothers from Chinese mainland and Taiwan who became new mothers during their programs of study in the U.S., especially how they kept learning their ongoing, dynamic, multifaceted, and embodied “language” of motherhood through various kinds of social interactions, and among divergent practices, beliefs, and cultures. This article explores how poetic inquiry can contribute to the understanding of international graduate student mothers' experiences as a social, cultural, and educational phenomenon. This article also discusses the issues of ethics and self-reflexivity of conducting poetic inquiry research.

Keywords: poetic ethnography; poetic inquiry; international students; motherhood; intercultural dialogue

According to the Open Doors Report (2019), by the academic year 2018-2019, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions totaled more than 1 million (1,095,299). Graduate students represented 34.5% of the international student population, with a total number of 377,943. Getting a graduate degree abroad marks an important and unusual period of transition and accomplishment in one's life. As women achieved greater equality around the world, more and more women were able to attend graduate school and even pursue graduate education abroad. However, female graduate students also must face many women-specific issues, one of which is the coincidence between the age of graduate study and women's fertility years. Through examining the changes in motherhood rates between 1970 and 2000 among women aged 20-49 who were enrolled in U.S. graduate schools, Kuperberg (2009) summarized that women enrolled in graduate school were increasingly likely to be mothers of young children, and almost half of the births occurred while women were enrolled in graduate school. In recent decades, as U.S. universities are enrolling more and more international students, many international students have combined motherhood/parenting with their academic study in the United States.

Becoming a first-time mother is not only a biological process, but also a social transformation (Kitzinger, 1995). As Collett (2005) stated, "a woman may become a mother by giving birth, but she truly takes on a mother identity by playing a socially defined, publicly visible role" (p. 328). In the U.S. context, Chase and Rogers (2001) further pointed out that "it is rarely said out loud that the good mother is a white, able-bodied, middle-, upper-middle-, or upper-class, married heterosexual" (p. 31). While the journey of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood is not easy for any woman, even for those who fulfill these criteria, it brings additional pressure to international graduate student mothers (IGSMs), who may also need to cope with the dramatic change of culture, tradition, medical system, sociopolitical context, and institutional knowledge in their second language, and struggle to balance the dual and often conflicting roles of being an international student and a first-time mother, all of which require tremendous emotional and time commitments.

For international students attending U.S. institutions of higher education, they are learning the languages of their disciplines. However, as Woo (2018) reminded us, learning happens not only in the classroom, but also in social spaces where people actually live their lives and that aren't typically regarded as educational sites. International students are also always learning from obtaining new identities, experiencing new things and interacting with other people in various social settings. The pregnancy, birth, and motherhood stories offer IGSMs many potential opportunities for second language and culture learning through interlinguistic and intercultural dialogues. During the process, international students' relatively high proficiency in academic English cannot be assumed to smoothly translate to other social contexts, such as medical encounters, because language is not a neutral mechanism of transferring thoughts, but "inseparable from a speaker's identity, speaking

purpose, intonation, nuances, and personalities” (Lee & Hassett, 2017, p. 463). While international students are negotiating their new social identity of a “good” mother in the host language and culture, they may have affordances from higher academic English proficiency but also some interactional challenges. For example, they might be assumed to know and understand more than they do because of the new genre/context where the “language” of motherhood is even “new” in their first language, but especially for those who are second language learners.

The process of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood is also rich in the moments when body and discourse are shared, when an individual body goes public and collective, and when human bodies become grotesque and unfinished. The “language” and identity of motherhood also includes an embodied learning process. For example, new mothers use their bodies to learn how to breastfeed, hold their newborns, and interact with their babies. In the context of a medical setting, before there is intersubjectivity, there is *intercorporeality* – when the doctor, fetus, and mother temporarily but meaningfully meet at the interface of bodies – when nurses, midwives and obstetricians not only talk with mothers-to-be, but also engage in a synchrony of these prospective mothers’ bodies.

As a result of my own experience of becoming a mother during my Ph.D. work as an international student, I am very interested in other IGSMs’ stories. This poetic ethnographic study provides an evocative interpretation of international graduate student first-time mothers’ experiences during their process of pregnancy, childbirth, and early years of motherhood in the United States. The aim of this study is not only to explore the lived experience of IGSMs as an under-represented group of people, but also delve into the interlinguistic and intercultural dialogues in social contexts, capture the dramatic moments of corporeality, language, identity, gender issues, and therefore contribute to the understanding of IGSMs’ experiences as a social, cultural, and educational phenomenon.

This article will address IGSMs’ stories in the following way. First, it will provide a brief literature review of immigrant mothers and motherhood in academia. Second, it will explore how poetic inquiry makes and communicates meanings in ethnographic studies. Third, the methods and contexts of this study are described. Then, a series of poems are presented to showcase the IGSMs’ lived experiences. Finally, I will reflect on the issues of ethics and self-reflexivity of conducting poetic inquiry research.

Qualitative Studies on Immigrant Mothers and Motherhood in Academia

To situate the stories of IGSMs in the context of globalization and higher education, I begin by incorporating a larger framework to borrow insights from two distinct bodies of literature: (a) immigrant mothers, and (b) motherhood in academia.

Immigrant Mothers

Contrary to the popular belief that we simply follow the natural laws and “common sense” of reproduction and motherhood, the practices from the prenatal stages to early years of childrearing are always social phenomena and biocultural events, which vary widely across time and space, and are firmly embedded in divergent physical, economic, socio-cultural, political, medical, and ethical environments (Gottlieb & DeLoache, 2017). The culturally diverse women’s pregnancy, birth and childrearing stories offer many unique lenses to explore the diversity and complexity of embodied experiences of maternity as related to gender, bodies, and space (Longhurst, 2008). They are meaningful for us to understand cultural differences as well as the larger political and economic contexts of globalization, poverty, and war facing so many families (Gottlieb & DeLoache, 2017).

As globalization and other forces bring more diversity to many societies worldwide, there is an increasing number of studies that focus on immigrant mothers’ struggles during pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing due to language and culture barriers, settlement issues, lack of support from extended family and community, unstable living conditions, heavy work as immigrants, and conflicts between childbearing traditions, as well as how they utilize their agency through motherhood (Hennegan et al., 2015; Jin et al., 2016; Lo, 2016). In their meta-synthesis of 15 qualitative studies published between 2003 and 2013, Benza and Liamputtong (2014) examined the lived experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood among immigrant mothers in Australia, Canada, USA, UK, New Zealand, and Switzerland. In total, 323 participants were included and the mothers were from Turkey, Portugal, India, Somalia, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Kenya. Benza and Liamputtong concluded that immigrant mothers’ pregnancy, birth, and motherhood experiences are strongly influenced by the societal and cultural values in both home and host countries. These mothers had “the desire to preserve their culture and traditions while trying to embrace the valuable knowledge of the new homeland” (p. 580). Likewise, Liem (1994) uses Ogbu’s (1981) notion of “cultural ecology” to explore the childrearing practices of Chinese first-time mothers in Australia. Liem (1994) argued that “individual parents do not invent new ways to raise their children, nor new competencies to transmit to their children” (p. 139), but follow “generations of collective experiences to meet the demands of physical, social, political, economic and supernatural environments” (p. 138). However, rapid social changes such as migration may compel parents to “either abandon or modify their traditional practices to meet new environmental demands” (Liem, 1994, p. 139) as part of their struggle for survival. It is also interesting to note that while the dramatic change of migration coupled with technological advances in recent decades, the communication with “home” and “traditional practices,” as well as the sharing of cultural knowledge and practices, might become more possible in various ways.

Motherhood in Academia

Douglas and Michaels (2004) defined the intensive mode of mothering as “the new momism” which insists that “to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” and enjoy every minute of it (p. 4). On the other hand, the academic landscape, which privileges “Western, competitive masculine frameworks for learning, teaching, and research” (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013, p. 9), determines that academics should be “monkish in their devotion and slavish in their pursuit of knowledge” (Springer et al., 2009, p. 438), and graduate students often need to work longer hours to simultaneously accomplish multiple obligations, such as teaching, conducting research, and working with faculty. Mason’s (2006) study revealed that graduate student mothers spend 102 hours per week on various kinds of paid and unpaid duties compared with 95 hours for graduate student fathers and 75 hours for childless graduate students. With regard to academic career, women with PhDs who had early career babies were 20% less likely to achieve tenure than were men (Mason & Goulden, 2002).

Springer et al. (2009) further pointed out that “graduate student mothers are not only confronted with logistical difficulties, limited support, and eventually constrained career paths; they must also contend with conflicting and powerful ideologies that surround academia and motherhood” (p. 438). In their study of faculty mothers, Eversole et al. (2013) proposed that “momprof” is seen as a stigmatized social identity, which violates “a set of appearances and actions as well as beliefs and attitudes that can be reasonably expected of each member” (p. 161) of the social identity category of professor. Similarly, graduate student mothers can also be regarded as a kind of stigmatized social identity. In some societies, it even remains as a cultural taboo for college students to get married (and become parents). For example, in China, only those aged under 25 and unmarried were allowed to attend universities until 2001 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2010). Marriage was prohibited among college students until 2005 (Chi et al., 2012), even though many of the students have reached the legal age of marriage (men 22, women 20). While now although universities would not expel students who get married (and become parents), marriage and childbearing still tend to be regarded as distractions, disturbances, and unwise choices on campus by many university administrators, faculty, students’ parents, and the students themselves (Zhou et al., 2013).

The literature of immigrant mothers and motherhood in academia has brought some important insights to the research on IGSMs. However, the IGSMs also have their own unique situations and experiences. As Zhang et al. (2011) suggested, “the boundaries separating the home and the workplace, along with the general isolation of international student families” (p. 523) keep their family, marital, and parenthood experiences off the radar

screen of higher education and mainstream academic research. Given the fact that the reason for international students to come to the United States was to study, their role as students tends to be the single identity that is overtly judged by others (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). However, the impacts of family, marriage, parenthood, and gender issues can play central roles in international students' adjustment to the new environment, personal and sociocultural stressors, cultural negotiation, immigration goals, and education for their children. Accordingly, these issues may also affect international students' learning experiences, academic research, and personal development in both explicit and implicit ways. A research-based understanding of international students' social identities is critical to develop effective strategies of improving international students' intercultural competency, and offering suggestions for colleges and universities to better serve the needs of their growing international student population.

Methodological Approach: Poetic Ethnography

Poetic ethnography refers to the integrating of poems in ethnographic studies. It can also refer to poetic prose, such as the ethnography that attends to its literariness, making the language rich and evocative, inclusive of metaphor and the qualities of creative writing (Maynard & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010). As ethnography became more open to literary forms under the postmodern turn in the mid-1980s, poetry has become a more accepted mode of representation in ethnographic studies. For example, Nomi Stone's (2008) poems were based on her anthropological research in one of the last cohesive Jewish communities in North Africa. Likewise, Cahnmann-Taylor (2016) did a poetic exploration of her own and others' second language acquisition based on her years of research and teaching among communities of second language learners in Mexico and the United States. These ethnographic poets, among a few others (e.g. Kusserow, 2002, 2013; Rosaldo, 1989, 2013), have provided inspiring possibilities to the field of ethnographic research as well as the field of poetry. Through the use of poetry, the lengthy, dense and complex data in traditional ethnography can be presented in a concise and evocative form, and therefore become meaningful and accessible to lay audiences who are not likely to read research papers. Poetic ethnography makes the ethnographer's experience central to the scene, and allows researchers to "listen to and report on the 'sentimented' nature of social life" rather than "treat emotion as ornamental of, or incidental to, economic, political or other instrumental acts" (Maynard, 2009, p. 121).

Poetry can be employed in heterogeneous ways in qualitative studies. Butler-Kisber (2012) classified poetic inquiry into two major categories: (a) found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Richardson, 1994), also known as poetic transcription, data poems, in which researchers transform the participants' interview transcriptions into poetry, with an emphasis of only using the exact words from the original data, but the words can be "rearranged or

juxtaposed in order to highlight themes, or to convey complex or conflicting ideas” (Furman, 2015, p. 105); and (b) generated poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2005), also known as interpretive poetry, where the researchers use their own words to create poems in response to data. Many studies in poetic ethnography adopt the approach of found poetry to transform the exact words from interview transcriptions into poems (Hanauer, 2014, 2015). Although the poems using direct words from interview transcriptions claim to convey the participants’ voices, the researcher’s voice always exists, because the researcher is the one who selected the words and crafted the poems based on their own understanding and interpretation, and also because “the word in language is half ours and half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). In this study, I adopt the approach of generated poetry to respond to the data collected from the field.

The Current Study: Context and Method

The current study began with my own personal poetic account that I had kept since my pregnancy in 2016 as a second-year international doctoral student. I continued my poetry writing as I negotiated with people as a new mother in various social settings, read literature on diverse mothers’ stories, interacted with other mothers, and conducted interviews with other IGSMs in the United States. Therefore, the poems are full of my own stories as well as my responses to other mothers’ stories. I didn’t create a series of individuals’ stories, but a conflated discourse that flows through all the participants and myself – receiving, reproducing, and transforming the discourse. I dialogically mixed and combined both personal and participants’ discourses, on which no one person was an authority, and connected them to broader sociocultural issues. The speaker “I” (if it appears in my poem) may refer to different people (and even some non-human artifacts). Since our language is always half someone else’s (Bakhtin, 1981), the voices of others populating in my poems may be cited directly or indirectly in accordance to the form and meaning-making process in each poem.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in 2017 fall, I started to enroll participants for this study. I first drew on personal contacts of mothers and requested them to help spread my research call to their own mothers’ circles. I also posted my research call to various online mothers’ groups on Facebook and discussion forums. In addition, the recruiting of IGSM participants was facilitated by the Office of International Education at my university through sharing the link of my online pre-screening survey to the email list of the whole international student population. Furthermore, I employed “snowball” sampling techniques (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). After I finished each interview, I would ask the participant if she would help introduce me to other IGSMs. In total, I enrolled eleven IGSMs who came from five universities in four different states in the United States. Six of them were in education-related fields. Ten of them were from Chinese mainland, and one was from

Taiwan. Both Chinese mainland and Taiwan are the leading countries of origin of international students in the United States. Together, Chinese and Taiwanese students accounted for 35.87% of international student population, with a total number of 392, 917 by the academic year 2018-2019 (Open Door Report, 2019).

Participant demographics are summarized in the table below (pseudonyms are used in place of real names).

Table 1

Information of Enrolled Participants¹

Mother's Name	Country of Origin	Years in the U.S.	Child Age & Gender	Child's U.S. State of Birth	Mother's Major of Study
Jing	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	0-2 Girl	RI	Public Administration
Cheng	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	0-2 Girl	WI	Business
Meng	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	3-5 Girl	WI	Information Science
Lu	Chinese mainland	6-10 years	0-2 Boy	GA	Health Promotion
Ting	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	3-5 Girl 0-2 Boy	GA	Language Education
Yuan	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	Before birth, Girl	GA	Educational Psychology
Zhan	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	0-2 Girl	GA	Language Education
Zhi	Taiwan	0-5 years	0-2 Boy 0-2 Boy	GA	Art Education
Qing	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	0-2 Girl	GA	Language Education
Pei	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	0-2 Girl	WI	Public administration
Duan	Chinese mainland	0-5 years	0-2 Boy 0-2 Boy	FL	Language Education

I collected data mainly through a pre-screening questionnaire, in-depth individual interviews, and WeChat (a popular Chinese social media application) group chatting records. The online pre-screening questionnaire, which took about 3-5 minutes to complete, aimed to collect some basic information about the potential participants' language, university, pregnancy, and birth experiences. The essential requirements and criteria of choosing potential participants included: (a) the participant was a self-defined non-native speaker of English, (b) the participant had a pregnancy and/or childbirth experience with her first child while pursuing a graduate degree at a U.S. university. In total, I collected 20 completed survey submissions, and 11 IGSMs agreed to be interviewed. In-depth interviews were conducted with each of the 11 IGSMs. The interviews with four IGSMs (Cheng, Meng, Pei, Duan) were conducted online through Skype due to their different locations in the United States. At the time of interviews, six IGSMs (Cheng, Meng, Yuan, Zhi, Pei, Duan) were enrolling in their program of study, and five IGSMs (Jing, Lu, Ting, Zhan, Qing) had recently graduated. Each interview lasted about 60-90 minutes. Two IGSMs (Zhi and Yuan) were interviewed twice to get their most updated stories. All interviews were audio-recorded with my participants' permission. Mandarin was used in all the interviews in order to get the maximum understanding in communication. The audio-recorded interviews were later transcribed and translated by the researcher.

In May, 2017, I created a WeChat group for Mandarin-speaking mothers in the town of my university. The initial members included 7 mothers, but now 51 mothers have joined the group. The mothers in this WeChat group include IGSMs, working mothers, visiting scholar mothers, postdoc mothers, and stay-at-home mothers. In the WeChat group, mothers shared information, stories, and raised questions about the problems they had regarding motherhood. The online chatting was always informative, practical, and covered various aspects and concerns of motherhood in a foreign country. I posted a group announcement in the WeChat group to let every member know that the information they provided might be included in my dissertation study. In particular, I paid special attention in collecting the WeChat group chatting records of the mothers who agreed to participate in my study.

I began my data analysis by searching for poetic ideas through closely reading the data. I particularly looked for those evocative, critical, and dramatic moments, which Cahnmann-Taylor and Hwang (2020) have referred to as "Kapow!" moments, as an imitation of the comic book action figure to express the surprise, the most shining points and "hot spots" where a poem is working. It is important to note that the evocation is made rather than "birthed" as big and dramatic events. Poems can make the seemingly ordinary become "Kapow!" and help the readers see the interesting from the mundane. I selected these Kapow! moments from the transcript, copied all the relevant data referring to each moment into a new document, which became the first draft/prompt of poems. This draft/prompt of

poems was “chronologically and linguistically faithful to the transcript” (Glesne, 1997, p. 207). For the second round, I drew from other sections of the data and took more license with words (Glesne, 1997), investigated the heterogeneous voices, connected to relevant literature and broader sociocultural issues, and transformed the first draft/prompt into a poem. For the third round, I seriously considered the aesthetic merit of these poems, kept revising them through reading, rereading, and poetry writing workshops with other poetry writer friends.

The following poems are presented to explore the lived experiences of IGSMs, especially how they learned the “language” of motherhood during their pregnancy, birth, and motherhood journeys. The poems are not accompanied by interpretive or explanatory texts, as “in the spirit of the poetic tradition’s call to ‘show don’t tell.’ The poems should speak for themselves” (Furman, 2015, p. 104).

Poems Showcasing IGSMs Lived Experiences

Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Contexts for IGSMs

One Child Policy (Zhang, 2013)

When Ms. Feng Jianmei was seven months pregnant in a remote village in Shannxi province, local officials forced her to have an abortion since she failed to pay the fines for violating China’s one-child policy.

---The New York Times, June 26, 2012 (Wong, 2012)

They said my boy shouldn’t be born
because I already have a girl.
They took me into custody.
I couldn’t afford the 40,000 yuan fine.
They gave me an injection of
anesthetic and poison.
Then my seven-month son
stopped kicking and giggling
in my womb.
They didn’t inform my husband
about the surgery.

Upon Returning to the U.S. to Pursue a Doctoral Degree as Trump Got Elected President (Zhang, 2019a)

The second year after my return to Georgia, I became a mother, a first-time international student mother.

My son was born on Trump's inauguration day.
He also had an immigrant mother.

On Skype, Mom shouts "Our Little Trump! He'll be president someday!"
"Or he may be banned," I say, "birthed to an immigrant mother."

We give him an American name, Edgar for Edgar Allan Poe. "How to say?"
"爱打嗝ai da ge (love hiccup)!" I explained to his grandmother.

徽言Huiyan, as his Chinese middle name,
beautiful words from Confucius, chosen by his mother.

Edgar Huiyan Xue (E.H.X.), always a middle initial included. It's not okay to be "EX," although a son's an ex-lover, in the past life, to his mother.

After the National People's Congress Approved the Constitution Amendments, Which Removes Presidential Term Limits and Allows Xi to Rule China Forever (Zhang, 2019b)

On TV, the delegates applauded,
20 seconds, after the voting
outcome was announced:
2,958 "YES", 2 "no".

"What a shame!!!!
Why doesn't he just declare he's the King?
Why doesn't he just say
'China should go back to the feudal monarchy!' "
I shout,
almost throw up my lunch.

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"
Mom can't wait to sew up my mouth.

“Only inside the home is fine.
Don’t say that in front of other people
especially Chinese!
You don’t know who actually they are!”

“You mean my friends are spies
of the Chinese government?” I laughed!
“Everyone can be!!!” Mom insisted.

She chopsticks me some fish,
“Eat more, talk less!
None of your business!”

IGSMs’ Pregnancy Stories

Pregnancy (Zhang, 2019c)

I have known the secret joy of pregnancy,
clip-clop of heartbeats in duet, high-fives across the belly,
a mini-stove in winter, a hug lasting 24/7,
a grey table, a white pillow, ice-cold ultrasound gel,
the most common androgynous creature detected,
a perfect patient, a happy hospital,
an additional free bread from the Korean baker in H-mart.
And I’ve seen the checklist of inappropriate mothers-to-be——
Too young, too old, too queer, too many children already,
Single, selfish, still in school (x), no stable job (x),
speaking imperfect English or no English at all (x),
an alien attempting to parent a U.S. citizen (x)...

Genesis (Zhang, 2019d)

In the second semester of my Ph.D.,
my mom started sending me
cute babies’ photos.
It became an eternal topic
for our weekly Skype meetings
across the Pacific Ocean.
“Hurry up! You are almost 30!”

My father-in-law formally talked
with my husband:
“When do you plan to have a baby?”
“顺其自然 (Shunqiziran).” – Let nature take its course.
(S-I-L-E-N-C-E)
“Don’t take any contraception.”
“Um.”

“Do you have any kids?”
The seventh time
I heard this question
from my Chinese & American friends,
I knew a due date
truly existed
not just for final papers.

Week 5: The First Prenatal Visit (Zhang, 2019e)

The baby is 100% Made in USA.
But when I got the sweet news,
I was in my hometown—
Shenyang, a big city in northeast China.

“Patient Zhang Kuo, please go to No. 5 consulting room”
called by an electronic voice
from the queuing machine.

The doctor glanced at my test result.
“You are pregnant.
Keep it or have an abortion?”

My big smile became awkward.
Hastily I said, “I want it! I want it!”
“Then you can go home now.”

As the machine called the next patient,
I complained to my mom,
“She is so rude and cold!!!”

“Why did you say that?
Isn’t it the normal way
a doctor should be?”

Week 9: Back to America (Zhang, 2019f)

I didn’t tell the Chicago custom official
how my Great Grandpa ploughed
in Shandong Province
with his foot-bound wife.

Nor that
Grandpa braved his journey to the Northeast,
served as a coal miner, then
a local official in the Communist Party.

And that my parents,
like the phoenixes rising from a chicken coop,
became first generation college students after the Culture Revolution,
that they settled down in the capital of Liaoning Province.

Though the official claimed to know all my stories:
Lagos for 8 months in 2010, 4 entries to Beijing,
U.S. state of Georgia 5 times since 2011...,
and how many more years, months and days I can legally stay.

Welcome back!
He smiled,
returned
a smuggler’s passport.

He didn’t know I was carrying
a tiny undocumented immigrant
& U.S. citizen
in my secret garden.

One who’ll speak a language that
belongs to
evil capitalists

in my grandpa's eyes.

Week 11: The First Prenatal Visit in the U.S. (Zhang, 2019g)

The front office lady gave me
a small white paper package
and a transparent urine bottle.

"Be sure to wipe before you do it,
then put it in the box on the wall."

"Uh, do you mean I should wipe...my hands?"

"Oh, no." The lady laughed.
She put her hand around her privates.
"Wipe here."

"Ohhh! I see." I laughed, too.

But still, I missed the latter part of her words.
Holding the bottle full of urine,
I searched around the passage.

"It is just there, on the wall, inside the restroom."
Another lady helped me out.

Later, I told my husband,
"I really feel I'm stupid here."

"Don't worry!
It is just the first time."

Week 20: Boy or Girl? (Zhang, 2019h)

It is against the law for a doctor
to reveal the gender
of a baby in China.
But if you bribe
or know someone who knows the doctor,
it's no longer a big deal.

My parents didn't know what I was
until the day I was born.
After hearing the "bad" news,

my grandma stayed in hospital.
A lifelong cold war broke out
between my mom and her in-laws.

断子绝孙(duan zi jue sun)—
die without sons and grandsons
the most venomous curse to Chinese people.
I am the terminator
who denied my father's right
to be buried in the ancestral grave.

"Would you like to know the baby's gender?"
asked by my sonographer.

"Yes, please."

The proud sign of a male
towered on the screen.

"You see! It's a boy!"

My parents-in-law got the "good" news
in a Skype call.

"Oh! A BIG Grandson!!!"

They grinned from ear to ear.

"如你所愿吧? (Ru ni suo yuan ba?)"—Is it as you wish?

"没有啦。(Mei you la.) Nono, boys and girls are the same."

2 Days after Week 20: A Phone Call (Zhang, 2019i)

"Hello, this is Athens Regional Midwifery.
You need to make an appointment with Dr. Godwin
—a maternal-fetal specialist."

"??? Okay...I need to see Dr. Godwin?
But, but for what?"

"Our doctor rechecked your ultrasound
and found some problems."

"Problem??? What problem?!!
They said everything was normal!"

Well, it might turn out to be normal.

But...the doctor found
intracardiac foci, multiple choroid nexus cysts and prominent kidneys.
...So, you need to see Dr. Godwin."

(????????????????????????????????)

"...kidney...?"

"Yes."

"O...Okay...So...what is the time and address?"

"It's at 10 am on Sep. 27th.
The address is 700 Sunset Drive, Suite 301."

"Sweet? What is sweet?"

"That is the doctor's room number."

"How do you spell that?"

"S-U-I-T-E. Suite."

"Ah...Oh...Okay. Thank you."

"Do you have any other questions?"

(Yes!!! But is it ridiculous to ask her
to repeat every word slowly?)

"No...I don't have questions."

"Bye."

Week 23: Dr. Godwin (Zhang, 2019j)

Not all pregnancy stories
have a happy ending.
But when the sun started glowing,
inside a half-ripen fluffy melon,
you can hardly connect it
to something abnormal.

For three weeks,
I touched the gentle but strong kicking
and teared at night

I hated hearing "Congratulations",
felt so hurt to see my Korean friend
holding his little girl's hand downstairs

I dig into the Internet for all the worst
Edwards syndrome, stillborn...

and presented a fake smile in the Skype meetings

I must be ice-cold and ghost-like
when I lay on Dr. Godwin's table
"You see this big white area in his head?"

"Yes." I looked at the screen.
and my heart sank to somewhere *abysmal*
Isn't funny I suddenly remember this GRE word?

"I didn't see anything significant.
All the cysts have disappeared.
IT'S A HAPPY BOY!!!"

Week 30: Antenatal Education (Zhang, 2019k)

No music.
No story.
You use Bakhtinian dialogism
to babble with Vygotsky.

You make me feel less guilty
to sleep too much.
We catch up on the papers,
and celebrate co-authorship.

You kick a rhythm in class discussion,
and draw a hill inside my belly.
I know you love the professor's voice
and arts-based inquires.

After the Taiwanese New Parents Heard about the Baby Shower

How can we wash the baby
when he/she's still in the belly?

Should we wait until the birth's
ten-fingers-ten-toes, and Mama's safe?

I see, but who'll hold the baby shower?
Is it weird to ask for gifts?

Oh, it feels impolite
to open the gifts immediately.

We would say, at least one time,
No, no, no. You're too courteous!

instead of *Thank you.*
That's so sweet!

And how should we repay
people's love? A big party later?

Interesting! But we'd rather not have one.
That's not our culture.

We'll cook youfan (glutinous oil rice),
one chicken leg and two boiled red eggs,
the symbols, you know,
for boys,

and cakes for girls.
(In fact, nothing for girls in the past.
But now people are
also happy to have girls.)

We'll send the food to friends' homes,
in exchange for their best wishes
and red envelopes (of course! Haha!),
as the baby turns one month old.

That's what we call
a full moon celebration.

IGSMs' Birth & Motherhood Stories

Non-native (Zhang, 2019l)

Bulldogs are non-native to Georgia.

The house is non-native to the land,
where bushes of Japanese knotweed grow
and European rabbits run.

Sunshine is non-native, forever, to earth.

Rice is non-native to rice cookers.

A wife is non-native to her husband,
who is native only to his mother.

Smartphones are non-native to fingers,
which are native to a beloved's face
on the screen.

I am non-native to English, just like
I am non-native to childbirth,
but I say "Oh, my God!!!"

when they told me "Push!"

After Delivery (Zhang, 2019m)

In the wheelchair,
I hold a newborn,
accepting applause
and "Congratulations!"
all the way to Mother/Baby Unit,
as if I heroed, injured
in a glorious battle,
awarded a Rose Gold trophy.

I had become a legend
for not using Epidural—

a 3.5-inch needle inserted
into the arched spinal cord,
threaded a catheter
of IV fluids into the back,
blocking the nerve impulses
from the lower spinal segments.

Let mothers rest and relax
during labor!

But I primitived, endured
the pain, imprinted on
every inch of the separation,
that'll never be reunited.

It is the same way Mom birthed,
still so common in China.

Lactation (Zhang, 2020)

Congratulations
on the naturally grown
sexy cups, of which
you've always dreamed
since a teen.

The rocklike touch
secures food stock,
a rich harvest
from peanut and pig feet soup
and white carp broth.

The little cannibalistic
monster's still sleeping,
his harmless face,
a camouflage.

At 3:00 am,
you're in trance, again,
with the dead milk cow,

accompanied by
a snoring anthropologist
called Daddy.

Disposable Diapers' Story

From Day 1, we're responsible to
guard the most private
and mysterious garden.

We're so proud for our gentleness,
flexibility and 24/7 service,
but our client often cries

to complain the unique flavor
of our home-made beers & mustard sauce—
the secret food for our 500 year lives!

Our client's grandma didn't like us:
"We only had jiezi in the past!
What a waste of money!"

"Oh, those rags from old clothes?
Nobody uses them in the U.S!"
Her daughter argued.

What a pity! I guess jiezi must
love beers, too. We can
"Cheers" before drinking.

An International Student Mother's Concerns (Zhang, 2019n)

How can I choose a daycare center?
Church school, development lab, Montessori, in-home care?
When I don't have anyone else's story to remember.

The chubby cheeks and cherry mouth are clever
to match the curve of my neck, while he clings like a koala bear.

It's a crime to drop him in a daycare center.

I was the kid who kicked, refused to enter,
cried too much. My teacher locked me in the bathroom, "Fair
to other kids!" A terrible story to remember.

I want him to learn English from a native-speaker,
but also worry about his Chinese. With yellow skin and dark hair,
it's hard to find Asians in Georgia daycare centers.

The shameless administration's a lavish spender
of my monthly salary, while they keep me waiting at the door,
full of expectations. A contradictory story to remember.

"The children were pricked, fed wasabi, stripped naked," from a Beijing newspaper.
It can't happen——right? Not over here?
It's so hard to choose a daycare center,
if you have so many stories to remember.

***Shumei Told me What Happened during Her Son's 15-Month Checkup, But My
American Friends Didn't Believe it***

When the nurse pushed the dose
into my son's thigh and said
"You are all set for today",
I realized something must be wrong.

"But we're here for the 15-month checkup!
What's the shot? Is it called this?"

I shivered to show her
"Pneumococcal"
in my cellphone, a name
too complicated to pronounce.

"Oh yes!"
"But he already got it last Tuesday!"

The nurse was shocked.
She checked her computer,

rushed to report.

The doctor came in.

“We’re so sorry!
The blonde girl who did records
made a mistake. We won’t let her
work here anymore!
And your boy will be fine.
He may get a bigger bump.
Don’t worry.”

I still felt angry,
wanted to say
something more.

But I nodded,
thanked him,
and just let it go.

Bi-weekly Routine

When your baby has a 104 degree fever,
poor sleep, no appetite, fussy and scorching,
you feel you aren’t ready to be a mother.

Daddy’s busy. Too sick for daycare. Babysitter,
a risky luxury. Wrap the 20 lbs to classroom teaching,
when your baby has a 104 degree fever.

You’d better videotape the vomits, otherwise stammer
embodied, to the pediatrician, like performing
in a pantomime. No, you aren’t ready to be a mother.

The tall blond female American doctor
suspects *Kawasaki Disease*. Emergency rushing
when your baby has a 104 degree fever.

Traffic jam, terminology, tests. Terror!
Almost the midnight, still waiting and praying.
You don’t want to be a STRONG mother.

Those sad stories always linger: a broken stroller
in car crash, leukemia, Rett Syndrome, drowning...
When your baby has a 104 degree fever,
you'll never be ready, but learn to be a mother.

Intimacy (Zhang, 2019o)

My husband doesn't believe
his parents have ever had sex,
because they're always like
revolutionary comrades
in Chairman Mao's times.

His mother always calls his father
his family name + given name.
I think that's too formal
and weird
even in China.

When they visit our home,
we must be cautious:
No touch, No hug, No kiss, No flirting——
all disrespectful and disgusting!

We stop calling each other
husband and wife,
only given names are acceptable.
Or sometimes I call him Daddy
(of our son), and he calls me Mommy.

When my two-year-old boy was
clinging to my chest,
gently pressing his cherry lips
onto my right cheek,
That's ugly. Grandma said.

My boy shrank, hesitated,
finally climbed down, ran
to his swarm of toy cars.

Promise

A promise to a child isn't hard to keep.
Even if what he yearns for is something
funny, you can't bear to see him weep.

You can promise every day: cheap
stickers, an ice cream cone, more swing
time. A promise to a child isn't hard to keep.

Then promise bigger, promise deep
love, and company, and Grandma's gold ring
for a future beloved. *All yours Boy, don't weep!*

Promise Captain Marvel, a Wrangler jeep.
He doesn't like Sun Wukong, your Monkey King.
Fine! A promise to a child isn't hard to keep.

Go ahead, promise Ivy Leagues, mountains steep
as Qomolangma, cosmic travel. Just kidding!
He knows. He knows. He ceases to weep.

Finally, promise a room, always a place to sleep,
no need to book. And some dumpling
soup— a parent's promise isn't hard to keep,
though it may be hard (for you) not to weep.

What If My American-born Son Asked Me What Elementary School Was Like? (Zhang, in press)

One day I just forgot it, the red scarf
we wore every day. I believed
it was a piece of the national flag,
dyed by the martyrs' blood.

I begged my mom to buy a new one
at the school gate, otherwise I'd be
caught by the Students on Duty

who wore red armbands.

They seized the ones who talked
or ran in the hallway, who failed
to make a right angle turn
at the landing in stairs.

They patrolled on the pedestrian overpass
and roads outside the school. If someone
bought candy floss, tofu skins,

flavored chicken brittle bones, or deep-fried
skewered mutton, they immediately took out
the armbands from their trouser pockets:

*"I am a Student on Duty!
Tell me your name, class and grade.
Let's go to the Discipline Office!"*

I hated them, but also dreamed of
becoming one of them, who had nothing
to be afraid of. In front of my chest,

I tied my newest red scarf (the sixth one
I think). As loudly as everyone else, I swore:
Fight for the cause of communism. Always prepared!

Epilogue: Reflections on Ethics and Self-reflexivity

In many poetic inquiry studies (Carroll et al., 2011; Hanauer, 2015), the poems written by the researchers were returned to the participants for some kind of member checking and poem revision (through presenting the poems to the participants for comments and revising accordingly to make the final version approved by both the participants and the researcher). Hanauer (2015) stated that the aim of such poetry member checking is to make sure that the poems "accurately represented the thoughts, feeling and experiences of the participants" (p. 85). Personally, I question the value and reliability of such member checking. No matter how accurately the poems reflect the participants' thoughts and situations, they are always a kind of discursive and reflexive interpretation from the researchers. Moreover, from Bakhtinian perspective, "our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7).

Since only others can see us in context and comprehend us as a whole, the ethnographers will never see the informants the same as informants see themselves. As a result, while the poetry member checking might be useful to some extent, it can never eliminate the semantic gap between the researcher and the researched. In addition, I believe poetry member checking may pose an undue burden on research participants, as many of them may not be prepared or feel comfortable commenting on poems. Therefore, I did not return the poems to my participants for member checking and/or revision. I did send them my poems as a way of sharing my research results/stories, but removed their burden of examining and commenting on whether my poems “truly” represent their stories. Instead, I invited my participants to read my poems casually in their spare time, as if they were reading a novel. They were not required to provide any comments or critiques, although many of them did send me messages to let me know how my poems made them feel moved, laugh, and cry as they revisited the journey of motherhood along with the poems, and how honored and grateful they were to help make marginalized voices heard.

Conducting the research and writing the poems helped me re-examine and better understand my own journey as an IGSM and a poet-researcher. During the research process, I was often driven by various kinds of “Kapow!” (Cahnmann-Taylor & Hwang, 2020) moments in life and in my research data to write poems. It could have been a moment after I woke up the fifth time and nursed my infant at 3:30 am, or as I kept thinking about my interview data as I changed my baby’s diaper, or as I had a funny or unhappy dialogue with my toddler, husband, and relatives. I tried to transform these “Kapow!” moments in life and research data into the “Kapow!” in my poems, during which I seriously considered and revised my lyrical decision-making and the language of poetic craft (Maynard & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010), such as the poetry forms, choices of subjects, details, metaphors, tones, and the length, stress, rhythm, repetition, alliteration, and rhyme. Finally, the “Kapow!” in my poems reversely informed and created more “Kapow!” moments in my life as I negotiated with numerous gatekeepers in various social contexts, as the experiences and voices of other IGSMs resonated and provided me with insights, as the poetry-writing process brought me a more sensitive and observational eye in life.

With regard to the practical implications of this study, I do advocate that IGSMs and all international students in U.S. universities use their motherhood experiences, as well as the intersections of identities and social positions, as potential learning opportunities to develop their second language interactional and intercultural competence. This study also provides insights to help the faculty and staff in U.S. universities and medical settings increase intercultural understanding and improve culturally responsive supports and services to IGSMs. For the general public, I hope my poems can help people, especially parents, realize how our parenthood choices and various kinds of “language” learning are always embedded in our family cultures and origins, as well as larger sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts.

Topics related to IGSMs' pregnancy, birth, and motherhood stories are far from exhausted. As more women continue to pursue personal development and career, and maintain multiple identities in addition to motherhood, the issues facing them become increasingly complex and challenging. According to an old Chinese proverb, “女子本弱，为母则刚” (Women are weak, but mothers are strong). To make this old proverb work better in the twenty-first century, I offer this revision: Women are no longer weak; becoming mothers makes us stronger.

Notes

1. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

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