

**Understanding Romantic Relationships Between Hong Kong  
Women and African Men: What Does It Mean to Have An  
“Abnormal” Relationship in Hong Kong?**

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## **Introduction**

It was September 2017, I was sitting in the computer room of the anthropology department at my university, frantically typing my essay in an ordinary afternoon. There was an African male student who was sitting next to me, apparently doing his paper too. I remembered who he was because he had been actively engaging in various social organizations. He was well-known because he was the only African student in the department, also he was quite outgoing and made many friends. I spoke to him two or three times before, but I did not think he remembered who I was, so I took the chance to introduce myself to him, hoping to make a new friend.

“Hey, my name is Christy! We talked before at the MTR, but I don’t think you remember me, haha!”

“Oh Christy, I remembered talking to you! I” He answered with a bright smile.

I thought to myself, “it is nice to meet an African friend, I can learn about his culture, this is so cool!” I didn’t know anything about Africa, I probably thought it was a country, and I was just proud of myself, as a local Hong Kong girl, for making an international friend. Later that day, we added each other on Facebook, chatted about school, football, social issues, which was fun. I was purely looking for a friend, I mean, having an African boyfriend was unimaginable in Hong Kong. Little did I realize I was talking to someone who later became my first boyfriend, and this is how the relationship started. It turned out that the seemingly ordinary afternoon became extraordinary, it became the start of one relationship that had the biggest impact on my life to date.

Having a romantic relationship with an African man was not something that I could tell people around me easily, for instance I was constantly afraid of the judgments people would have given me if they found out. It is really uncommon for a Hong Kong girl to have an African boyfriend, also people have negative assumptions about African people in general. Such a relationship is not considered normal in Hong Kong society. Therefore, after having this romantic relationship and reflecting on the experience, I decided to do this study on romantic relationships between Hong Kong women and African men in Hong Kong to understand how these interracial couples navigate through uncertainties and how they see the relationships themselves. This study aims to see how race, gender, and culture intersect, and how ideals about gender and romance are constructed in Hong Kong.

### **Research Significance**

Romantic relationships between Hong Kong women and African men are quite rare in Hong Kong, but such an unconventional combination is significant in how ‘abnormal’ it is, which reflects many taken-for-granted and unconscious expectations on a romantic relationship in Hong Kong. Such expectations are deeply embedded in Hong Kong society which unconsciously shape how people understand romance, love, dating, and marriage. This influences how people choose their partners and how they perceive intimate relationships of other people. These expectations are multifaceted such as race, gender, sex, class, culture, and family, all these expectations and imaginations on intimate relationships are exemplified in the stories of African-Hong Kong couples. How they live their everyday life is profoundly shaped by these public expectations, and it is often challenging for them to face pressures from these different aspects, which may affect how they see their own identities and whether the relationship can sustain in a long term.

Associated with many assumptions and stereotypes in society, these African-Hong Kong couples have to find a way to navigate through these misunderstandings and express romantic relationships differently than other ‘normal’ couples. Other than these external obstacles, as the nature of the relationship is inherently interracial and intercultural, the gender expectations and the role of sex in a relationship may be different in both cultures, how womanhood and manhood are interpreted respectively in both cultures may be fundamentally different. These differences would be something that ‘normal’ couples do not have to deal with, which may enhance the dating experience, cause conflicts between them. It may lead to other outcomes such as influencing their views on love and marriage, which can be a wildcard. Having drastically different languages, social and economic backgrounds, personal histories, worldviews and values, the couple does not share a common understanding of the world. How much they are going to adhere to their own roots or adapt to one another’s culture would be an interesting arena for these couples to access.

Hong Kong is famously known as an international metropolis and the financial hub in the global economic arena, and that is what people commonly think of about how globalization works in Hong Kong – only between international big corporations. However, few people perceive globalization as the movement of people across borders, immigration policies and policies specifically about asylum seekers allow people from African countries coming to Hong Kong. Hong Kong has been predominantly an ethnically homogenous city and people are used to live with those from the same race and culture. How the general public understands and interprets the new faces greatly influenced how these African-Hong Kong couples live their lives. With policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, there will be more African men coming

to Hong Kong and possibly form a romantic relationship with Hong Kong women. How Hong Kong people adapt to these changes is associated with the rapid rate of globalization.

This research is about the heterosexual monogamous romantic relationship between black African men and ethnically Chinese Hong Kong women because black men are often associated with negative racial stereotypes in Hong Kong, but in recent years there have been more positive reactions to them from the younger generation, the complexity of what it means to be black in Hong Kong has been evolving, thus influencing the public perception of these relationships. Moreover, many black African men in Hong Kong are asylum seekers, who are prohibited from working and they do not have a stable life. For those African men who are not asylum seekers, they are usually working class and they do not earn a lot of money. The racial implications of blackness in Hong Kong are important, but so as the implications of class.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do the Hong Kong public view African-Hong Kong couples?
2. How are the experiences of these romantic relationships like?
3. What are the practical concerns in these interracial relationships?
4. How do cultural differences play a role in these intercultural relationships?

### **Methodology**

Interview is of paramount significance in this research because the nature of the project is about romantic relationships. From February to November 2019, I have been searching for informants who are currently in an African-Hong Kong romantic relationship or who had previous experiences. I found my informants mainly from various media platforms where some of these couples were interviewed before, I also found new ones through my connections with

ethnic minorities and asylum seekers made in the Anthropology department. As I dated an African man before, I am able to reflect on my experience as well. I also conducted informal interviews and chats with African asylum seekers that I met in the Chungking Mansions. I gained access to these informants with the kind help from my supervisor/advisor Gordon Mathews.

I conducted online ethnography to collect public opinions about these interracial couples. I went through the comments and discussions that people made about these couples and analyze how they view such relationships.

## **1. Public Perception of African-Hong Kong couples in Hong Kong**

To discuss how Afro-Chinese couples are understood and received by the public, it is important to first discuss how black people in general are being perceived in Hong Kong in order to contextualize these relationships. Then, through analyzing comments made by Hong Kongers on online social platforms, the general public perception towards African men and these relationships will be revealed.

### **Africans in Hong Kong and Their Representations**

There are around 2000 Africans in Hong Kong according to the Hong Kong African Association (Zheng and Leung, 2018), the majority of whom are asylum seekers and some of the major residential areas for them are Yuen Long and Tsim Sha Tsui. The total population in Hong Kong is around 7.5 million and such a tiny population of Africans in Hong Kong means that they are often invisible in the public eye – they are not seen in the daily life of a Hong Konger and they are not widely represented in the media. It is quite unusual to see a black African person on the street in the normal daily life of a Hong Konger. In Hong Kong, over 92% of the population is ethnically Chinese, therefore Hong Kong is in fact not an ethnically diverse place even though it is considered to be an international metropolis. If a Hong Konger who was born and raised here, attended local primary school and secondary school, it is likely that this person has never met a black African in their life. The idea of a black African person is thus like imagination, and such imagination is likely to be influenced by how media portray black people in general. This imagination built solely by media may be inaccurate, but it is of fundamental importance in determining how Hong Kong people treat any black African person when they encounter one.

Africans are often portrayed by the media as criminals and violent beings. In recent years, there are media platforms always use the term “fake refugees” whenever the news is about asylum seekers. For example, one of the right-leaning local newspapers, Oriental Daily, often features news about their crimes such as theft, drug dealing, sexual harassment, and wounding. The use of words in these news articles is opinionated, such as “Southeast Asian fake refugees keep committing crimes in Hong Kong”, with the application of statistics to show that the crime rate of refugees has been increasing (Oriental Daily 2017). Also, there are visuals like pictures and videos featuring asylum seekers who were working illegally, having marijuana, and committing other crimes. Hong Kong people are bombarded by such news and visuals and they can easily identify the featured refugees in the news as the agent of violence.

Although the above news articles did not target black Africans in Hong Kong, such inaccurate generalizations made towards the whole ethnic group reflect how the local ethnic Chinese perceive ethnic minorities. There are various words in Hong Kong that some people use to refer to ethnic minorities, such as “bun bun” to address Filipinos, (a term derived from the Cantonese word for the Philippines, “Fei Lut Bun”), “ah chah” (similar to the Hindi word “acha” which means OK) to refer to Indians and Pakistanis or to call black people “black ghost” in Cantonese (South China Morning Post 2018). Even for Europeans who are seemingly superior, “gweilo” was considered derogatory, but now it is accepted. However, while these terms are racist intrinsically, they are not perceived in Hong Kong as provocative and offensive as the racial slurs in the United States, because of a different racial politics and racial history in Hong Kong. Again, Hong Kong is a rather homogenous city, ethnically Chinese Hong Kongers are often surrounded by people who look like them, therefore they may express their uncertainty about anything that is foreign.

Black African people are rare in Hong Kong, they are foreigners and often are associated with negative images. Generally speaking, Hong Kong people do not have much knowledge about African history, culture, and social issues. Growing up in Hong Kong, the image people have for Africans are mainly from the television advertisements of various charities, asking for a donation to help the poor, starving kids in Africa. According to a sarcastic article about how to write about Africa which was written by Wainaina (2019):

“In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don’t get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn’t care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.” (Wainaina 2019)

This would not be far off from how Hong Kong people perceive Africa. Such images are deeply rooted in the minds of many Hong Kong people which influence how they perceive any black person whether or not that person is from Africa. They may have inaccurate generalized assumptions for black people such as they are all from Africa, poor and starving. They all think that Africans are usually associated with AIDS and Ebola, thus unclean and inferior. Blackness is not only exotic, but it is also embedded with many negative connotations.

### **Localist Movements: Can Africans Have the Hong Konger Identity?**

The key question is, is it possible for Africans to be included in the Hong Konger identity? Can they ever be seen as Hong Kongers? This is crucial and fundamental to the experience of these couples. “Hong Konger” is a unique identity for Hong Kong people, usually refer to those who embrace local Hong Kong culture, lifestyle, and often a political stance supporting freedom and democracy in recent years. It is not a static concept, it changes according

to the social, economic and political context at the time. It emerged in the 1970s which was rooted in consumerism and Cantonese pop culture (Veg 2017, 324). As the economy was booming, social mobility was attainable through one's own effort, ability and merit instead of class background, that was the Hong Kong dream (Lowe and Tsang 2018, 557), also known as the Lion Rock Spirit which celebrates that socio-economic achievements at that time. However, this identity has largely been inclusive to ethnically Chinese Hong Kongers and contributions made by ethnic minorities are often overlooked. For example, the Colonial Government hired Indians as soldiers and policemen, their future generations were born and raised in Hong Kong but often face discrimination such as being called the derogatory term "*Ah Cha*" (Law and Lee 2013, 989).

In recent years, the localist movement is on the rise. It is a political movement that aims to preserve the city's unique local culture and autonomy. Hong Kong was a British colony and returned to China in 1997. There are many differences between the Hong Kong culture and the Mainland Chinese culture such as languages, lifestyle, and ideologies. Under "One Country, Two Systems", Hong Kong should be given the right to keep such traditions and continue the Hong Kong lifestyle. However, under the growing control of the Chinese central government on the city's management as well as the ever-increasing number of mainland immigrants and tourists, some Hong Kong people fear that their unique history and culture will be lost, as well as the political autonomy Hong Kong people think they should have.

Various social movements have taken place after the handover. The July 1<sup>st</sup> protest against the enactment of the National Security Ordinance in 2003, the protest against national education in 2012, the Umbrella Movement in 2014 against the proposed reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system, and the 2019 anti-ELAB movement, all of which reflect Hong Kongers' Hong Kong Anthropologist. Vol. 10, 2020

hope to protect the local core values – freedom and rule of law, the fight for democracy, and more explicitly to emphasize that Hong Kong is different from China.

The notion of localism is on the rise (Veg 2017, 325), phrases like “Hong Kong people first” and “democracy and self-determination” became popular in the context of the increasing Chinese interferences in Hong Kong policies. The Hong Konger identity has seen a shift from a celebration of economic achievements to the collective pursuit of values such as justice, freedom and democracy. This seems to be more inclusive to ethnic minorities because if they embrace these values and choose to participate in these movements, they have higher chances to be seen as “real” Hong Kongers by the mainstream group.

This shows that the Hong Konger identity has changed rather drastically over the past decades. “Does Hong Kong, as part of China, exist for people of Chinese ethnicity and nationality, or can anyone in the world become a Hong Konger?” (Mathews 2018, 52) The insights of the ethnic boundary-making paradigm can be drawn from to understand the complexity of the Hong Konger identity:

“First, ethnic groups are seen as the result of a potentially reversible social process of boundary-making rather than as self-evident units of observation and analysis. Secondly, actors mark ethnic boundaries with cultural diacritics they perceive as relevant, such as language or skin color, and the like. Third, ethnic groups do not emerge spontaneously from the social cohesion between individuals that share culture and origin, but from acts of social distancing and close vis-à-vis members of other categories.” (Wimmer 2009, 254)

Firstly, the Hong Kongers identity has a dynamic and fluid boundary that includes people with different visions of how Hong Kong should be like at different times. Secondly, the criteria that mark who gets to be Hong Kongers are decided by what people consider as relevant. For example, in the recent anti-ELAB movement, there is a popular saying that “Hong Konger is not defined by race”, which implies that whoever embraces the values of the movement can be a

Hong Konger. Thirdly, the emergence of the recent Hong Konger identity is largely based on distancing Hong Kong from China, and this brings together all people who share the same sentiments against China.

In the context of localism in Hong Kong, as people fear the “others” taking over Hong Kong, there is an urgent need to establish who “we” are. Yuen and Chung (2018) discussed two perspectives for analyzing localism in Hong Kong, “one perspective tends to analyze the localist movement from a structural angle, interpreting it as a product of Hong Kong’s socio-economic and political development and its changing relationship with mainland China.” (Yuen and Chung 2018, 19) Another perspective is “the development of nationalism or shifts in national identification” (Yuen and Chung 2018, 20), that Hong Kong people greatly dislike their Chinese identity and want to form a Hong Konger identity. Therefore, there are people advocating for preserving Cantonese and Traditional Chinese, and embracing values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights. Also, resources and welfares in Hong Kong should be given to Hong Kongers first before distributing them to immigrants.

There is a strong sense of promoting local culture and the identity of ‘Hong Konger’, and it can be implied that there are certain characteristics attached to the Hong Konger identity which sets this identity apart from other identities. I was taking a gender studies class at The Chinese University of Hong Kong<sup>1</sup> with other students, and we were asked to describe the characteristics of a Hong Konger. The key responses were “speak Cantonese”, “embrace local traditions and cultures”, “be polite”, “is willing to queue”, and “hate Communism”. These answers reflect the

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<sup>1</sup> It was the lecture on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2019 of the “Public Policy and Social Minorities in Hong Kong” course of the Gender Studies Department of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. It was taught by Dr. Cho Man Kit. Hong Kong Anthropologist. Vol. 10, 2020

hatred of these young students towards the Chinese government and the Chinese people, and a strong sense of “us” versus “them”.

Although it was not mentioned in one of the responses, the race and ethnicity of a person are also determining to decide whether a person can be considered a Hong Konger. There is a generational divide on the question about who can have the identity of a Hong Konger. It is commonly assumed by people from the older generation that only ethnically Chinese people can be considered as Hong Kongers, going back to the fact that Hong Kong is an ethnically homogenous city. Contrary to the popular belief that white people are at the top of the racial hierarchy, a white person is not likely to be viewed as a Hong Konger even if that person is legally a permanent resident of Hong Kong. For African men in Hong Kong, they do not fit into the popular imaginations of Hong Kongers. They usually speak English or other foreign languages, and cannot speak Cantonese, they do not share the common history of the Hong Kong community. In short, it is hard for them to be considered as a “normal” Hong Konger compared to a Chinese-looking, Cantonese speaking person.

There are only around 2000 Africans in Hong Kong as previously mentioned. For Hong Kong women who have an African husband or boyfriend, the number will be even smaller, making them nearly invisible. When I asked my female Hong Kong friends about their views on such romantic relationships, most of them responded that they have never thought about such a combination and they have never seen such couples before. It is rather interesting for these women to have such a unique experience because not many people share that experience, it would be quite hard for them to have previous role models to follow, in terms of what to expect in the relationship and what the challenges are.

## How People Talk About African-Hong Kong Romantic Relationships

In recent years, there are some liberal news media platforms such as Apple Daily, HK01 and BBC publicizing stories of the marriage between Hong Kong women and African men<sup>2</sup>. The value of the news is that such couples are rare, and these stories can attract viewers because people will likely to be interested and curious about the exotic and highly uncommon couples. It is rather strange in Hong Kong to see these couples and such news can grab the attention of the viewers. These stories are mainly about how the two people met, how they fell in love, their daily life experience being together. These articles are shared on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube<sup>3</sup>, have been attracting viewers and people have been commenting under these stories. Interestingly, the public perception has been mixed. **The comments below are extracted from numerous comment sessions under these articles, posts, and videos online.**

### *Negative Responses*

The negative responses can be mainly divided into 4 categories, and some comments are highly offensive. Firstly, it is about the stereotype of black men having a bigger penis and a higher sex drive. Some examples are “once you go black, you never go back” and “the girl likes eating black sausage”. These comments have the implication of objectifying and sexualizing black African men by reducing their humanity to only their sex organ, which is a form of dehumanization of black men. And for the Hong Kong women, these comments seem to suggest

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<sup>2</sup> There are many articles about such relationships on various news media platforms. For example, there is an article featuring the story of an African-Hong Kong couple on HK01, entitled “A Hong Kong woman marrying an African man: It’s not about his skin color”. <http://www.hk01.com/社區專題/193943/港女嫁非洲人-上-地鐵邂逅留電話-相戀20年-我不是愛他膚色>

<sup>3</sup> There are many videos about Hong Kong women being in a romantic relationship with African men on Youtube. An example of such videos is as followed, it is entitled “A Hong Kong woman marrying a black man and not a Hong Kong man! Complaining that Hong Kong men are not gentlemen” (港女嫁黑人不要港男！話港男「無風度」) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQsqbt8-qec>

that the only reason these women choose to be with an African man is that the African men have a large penis which can satisfy the woman's sexual need, which implies that there are no other forms of connection in the relationship. It is rather degrading and explicit to use "sausage" as a metaphor to comment on someone else's relationship. It may be related to the exoticness of Africans in Hong Kong.

Secondly, it is about labelling African men as fake refugees who are criminals in Hong Kong. There are a few examples, "99.9999% of refugees are fake, they only come to Hong Kong for the \$3000 subsidy every month without having to work", "there will never be enough public housing if we keep having locusts and black spiders, sometimes I really like Trump who will protect their own citizens first", "maybe the guy only wants to get the Hong Kong ID card", "they are causing trouble in districts like Yuen Long and Tsim Sha Tsui". The term "black ghost" is often seen in these comments. These comments highlight the general perception of Africans in Hong Kong, and how these African men are only trying to get economic benefits and earning Hong Kong residency through having a romantic relationship with Hong Kong women. These comments also imply that Hong Kong women are naive because they do not know that they are used by these African men, as if they have no ability to think critically.

Thirdly, it is the assumption that some less attractive Hong Kong women can only settle with an African man because they cannot attract local Hong Kong guys. Among the women being interviewed in these articles and videos, several of whom would be considered unattractive using the local beauty standard because of having a so-called oversized body. Some examples are as followed, "having such an appearance (of that woman), only a refugee will take her" and "because she cannot find a Hong Kong man who likes her". These comments suggest that these undesirable Hong Kong women have to settle for "less" with African men, which has the

implication that Black people are inferior to Hong Kong men. It is rather discriminatory against those women who are not considered beautiful by society's standards.

Fourthly, there are blatantly discriminatory comments towards African men. Some examples are "say no to AIDS", "according to anthropological research, African people have the lowest intelligence in the world", "they are like chimpanzees". Some people expressed concerns if these couples will have children because they think Africans are not visually appealing, which would make the children also not beautiful. "The hair texture of black people is so curly which doesn't look good! It is sad that the two daughters are inherited with this gene, they won't have beautiful hair!" These discriminatory comments expose the racist thoughts some people have towards black people, which render black people as inferior, or even non-humane. Such comments completely deny the humanity of black people.

#### *Concerns and Encouraging comments*

Other than these comments based on assumptions and stereotypes, there are also comments that express concerns over the feasibility of an interracial marriage. One of the comments goes, "Love has no borders, but I cannot accept being with someone who cannot speak the same language as me. Even if you can speak good English, it will be hard to accept different cultures." Another comment goes, "I have seen too many black men who would like to marry a girl right after they met, like those from Uganda. They really like marriage, it's like they want to get married only for the sake of getting married." These comments are pointing out some possible obstacles in interracial relationships such as language barriers, cultural differences especially in terms of different imaginations about the relationship.

There are also some positive comments in these articles, most are similar which are about how such relationships are as normal as other relationship as long as the two people love each other, regardless of their race, for example, “Love should not be categorized into skin color and races”. Some would understand such relationships as only the matter between the two people involved, “It is funny, it is none of your business about who she marries.” One comment caught my attention because it relates to what it means to be a Hong Konger, it goes “It should not matter that he is a black person, as long as he is willing to follow the rules of Hong Kong, love and protect the Hong Kong culture, I believe that they can be one of us too.” This shows a more open perspective regarding who can be a Hong Konger, that the identity of Hong Konger does not have to be bounded by skin color, but by whether a person is willing to take part in preserving the local culture.

#### *Implications of race and class*

One comment stands out from all the comments, it says “People frown upon a Hong Kong woman marrying an African guy but think it is high-class to marry a white guy. So weird.” This comment deals with the racism in dating, which suggests that there is a racial hierarchy for the partner of Hong Kong women in relation to which race is looked up to in Hong Kong. Whiteness in Hong Kong has the implication of sophistication and superiority, for example, people look up to the US and other European countries, they tend to think people who speak good English are smarter, they follow the western popular culture. Another possible reason would be that generally speaking, white people in Hong Kong are usually more economically well-off, so it is more about class rather than race. Interestingly, following the comment, someone replied, “if the black guy is rich, many girls would want to be with him”, suggesting that economic reasons play a more determining role than racial discrimination. “The question of

racism in Hong Kong is complicated: to what extent is it a matter of the color of one's skin and to what extent the color of one's passport?" (Mathews 2018, 55) This highlights the intersectionality in discrimination against African people, and it is difficult to single out only one factor.

Based on these comments made on online social media platforms, how people talk about these couples clearly show that these couples are considered strange in Hong Kong society. There is a clear distinction between the normal "us" and the abnormal "them" and looking at the way how the majority talks about the minority, these couples are discriminated against and face the pressure of verbal harassment and violence. Comparing to a couple which consists of two local people, couples consist of a Hong Kong woman and an African man cannot live their daily life at ease and risk being treated differentially in many aspects of their life. Looking at other social minority groups in Hong Kong such as mainland Chinese people in Hong Kong, they are often discriminated against when people hear them speaking Putonghua and writing simplified Chinese because of the anti-Chinese sentiments in Hong Kong. However, since there is a larger number of them, they have an organized power to speak against discrimination such as using Wechat to create a safe space for mainlanders in Hong Kong to communicate. However, for the African-Hong Kong couples, they are a minority group with no organized effort to unite people in this community for mutual support. They remain invisible most of the time.

This influences how Hong Kong people view and treat such African-Hong Kong couples. Since they are almost invisible to the public, people do not even think about these couples, thus not having adequate knowledge of how to interpret such relationships. Hong Kong people, being the majority in Hong Kong, have the privilege of having their relationships presented in public with ease, having media representations, having people discuss it freely, having the blessings

from family and friends... These privileges appear to be rather simple and not worthy of being mentioned, but for African-Hong Kong couples, these seemingly simple parts of daily life are privileges that they do not have.

## **2. Changing Identities: You Are Who You Date**

In view of the context of African-Hong Kong couples being an abnormality in Hong Kong, their daily life experience is greatly affected. African men are often discriminated against in Hong Kong. For these Hong Kong women, they experience a drastic change in how other people view them, and such changes can be explained using the concept of liminality. These Hong Kong women are being judged on their choice of dating an African man, and they have to face many struggles just because of that.

### **Accounts**

#### *Personal Account*

As this project also serves as a self-reflection, I am going to draw heavily on my personal experience of having been with an African boyfriend.

I am a 22-year-old, middle-class college student, studying anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I attended local primary and secondary schools, all of my classmates were local Hong Kong Chinese. When I entered university, the biggest shock for me was that there are students from different parts of the world. There was a visual element to the shock because it was the first time I encountered people who ‘look’ different than me in terms of skin color and ethnicity. I had the opportunity to interact with students from countries like the U.S., Sri Lanka, Indonesia, as well as African countries. That was the first time for me making friends from other parts of the world other than from Hong Kong, which was quite exciting for me.

When I was in year 3, I started dating an African student who is also an anthropology student. He is knowledgeable and eloquent. He gave me the impression that he knows a lot about global issues. I was quite attracted to his personalities – confident, humorous, passionate. He also had a clear mission in life which is eradicating racial inequality. I thought he is such a good role model and I can learn so much from him. In the beginning, it was just friendship, but he showed his romantic interests quite explicitly and aggressively. He complimented me a lot, for example, “you look very beautiful without makeup”, “How come you don’t have a boyfriend? You are so cool, you should have 20 boyfriends”. I had never been complimented this directly before, so I was quite surprised and felt quite happy at that time. It took only 2 weeks for us to go from friends to boyfriend and girlfriend.

At that time, I had been thinking a lot about the fact that he is black – I was worried that my parents would not like him, and I did not think we can go public because I was scared that people would look at us all the time. We were studying at the same school and the same program, we often hung out at the school. However, I did not want to show affection in public. I remember at the beginning of the relationship, we were flirting a little bit by the lake on the campus in the evening. He grabbed my hand and wanted to hold it, to show that he liked me. It was quite dark, and no one was around, but the first thing that came into my mind was *fear* – I feared that people may see us, especially people I know. I hesitated for a few seconds and then withdrew my hand from his hold, claiming that he had been too aggressive in courting which scared me, but I just did not want people to think that I was dating him. People must think it was weird.

I remember another anecdote. We were hanging out in Tsim Sha Tsui, and there were some people from UNICEF asking people to sign a petition on the street. A guy approached us and asked us to sign it and chatted with us for a bit. I forgot what we were talking about, then he asked us what our relationship was. I was a bit annoyed, I hesitated for a few seconds then I wanted to say we were friends, but my boyfriend already said that we were dating. Then the UNICEF guy smiled and congratulated us, then he asked my boyfriend whether he is from the U.S., my boyfriend said he is from Africa. The UNICEF guy's positive reaction made me happy although he still had assumptions. Basically, whenever my boyfriend and I were together in public, people looked at us quite often. Like if we sat together on the MTR and chatted, there would be people staring at us. Not all the time, but quite often. I could not tell what they were thinking, but I felt that I was being judged silently.

Since we studied at the same school, we had lunch together quite often. One day, we had lunch at a canteen, and I took the table first when he went to the cashier and purchased our food. I was waiting for him, and suddenly my friend Stella greeted me. She sat down with her lunch set and started chatting with me. I freaked out a little bit because obviously I did not want her to know that I was dating an African man, I did not know how to explain to her especially we were not very close. My boyfriend then came back with the food and the three of us start chit-chatting about school life. Since Stella and I were in the same student club, we were the ones talking and my boyfriend was kind of left out in the conversation. When Stella noticed that, she asked me "how did you two know each other?" That was a typical question that people would ask when they see a local student hanging out with a foreign student in general. I immediately responded

without thinking, “oh, he is just a *random* friend.” It was quite hurtful for me to say that in front of him, we quarreled because of this afterward. He told me, “I was referred to things that were way worse than this.”

Throughout the time of dating him, I found it very burdensome to deal with those stares, I didn’t want the attention and I was usually at unease. I only shared this with my close friends, I did not tell my family and my other friends about it and I probably never will. I do not want to deal with the judgments or assumptions people have. One of my close friends told me not to worry too much, we were just dating and not marrying each other. I thought she made a good point, that basically how I had been thinking throughout the relationship, I had the mentality of enjoying while it lasted. It was not meant to be a long-term, stable thing. It was already hard to have an African *boyfriend*, let alone an African *husband*.

### *Lisa and Roy*

Lisa was born and raised in Hong Kong, she studied at local mainstream schools, all her friends had been local. She met Roy who is an African pastor and came to Hong Kong to do missionary work. Roy is from Cameroon. He was a doctor, and then he became a missionary. That was around 8 years ago, they met in a convenient store. It was love at first sight for Roy, he got her number and he was using MSN to chase Lisa for the first two months. They fell in love and got married.

We started hanging out after those 2 months. I remember our first date was a café in a cinema in Yau Ma Tei. That’s how we started dating, but I tried to keep distance with

him when we were walking down the street because there must be some people who would look at me in a *strange* way, as if they were thinking, “*oh, this girl is with a black man.*” Luckily, my family and friends have been supporting us, we got married after a year we met, and now we have 2 daughters. My family is not that traditional, they welcomed him and invited him for dinner. They didn’t oppose our relationship.

### *Sarah and Shane*

Sarah was born and raised in Hong Kong and had been working as a marketing manager in a big company. She is a confident, outspoken, career-oriented woman who takes pride in her strong and independent personality. She never imagined that she would eventually end up marrying an African man. She was 30 when she met Shane. Shane is from Nigeria, and he grew up and studied in the U.S. He went to Hong Kong to look for better working opportunities, and then he met Sarah. “I was fascinated when I first saw her.” Sarah giggled, “but I was not.” They have been married for 10 years now and have two kids. They stayed in Hong Kong for around 8 years until they decided to move to Lagos, Nigeria together as a family.

Sarah talked about how she met Shane:

I remember that day I was at work. Suddenly, my eyes were not feeling well, they turned red and I kept tearing up. I told my boss that I needed to see a doctor immediately. After seeing the doctor, my sight was blurry, and I couldn’t really see clearly. Then someone came to me and asked for directions, I pointed him to the way and left. After 3 or 4 weeks, I was having a drink with my friend at Tsim Sha Tsui. My friend told me that her friend was bringing something for her and would like to ask her friend to come to the

restaurant we were at. Then her friend arrived, and he looked at me and said, “oh, it’s you!” I looked at this man, I was like “I have never seen you before, what are you talking about?” Then he explained to me that he was the one who asked me for directions that day.

“It was love at first sight.” Shane said. He was just walking down the road, and he was already attracted to Sarah. Sarah continued:

10 years ago, Shane came to Hong Kong for work. I was going through a rough time as I just got out of a relationship. He was there for me and comforted me, and I started falling in love with him. My parents were against the relationship, but I decided to marry him. However, after we got married, Shane’s life in Hong Kong was still not easy and he was depressed. He experienced discrimination for many times, many Hong Kong people have never met black people. When some older aunties and he were in the same elevator, they would cover their nose right in front of him! Sometimes when we took the MTR, there was a vacant seat next to him, but people would not take the seat because my husband was next to it. Even worse, sometimes it would be like a person was sitting, but when my husband sat next to him, he would just leave the seat and frowned. My husband never told me about his feelings on these, but I knew in my heart that he was suffering. Sometimes when I walked with him on the street, some people would talk to me in Cantonese, “*Is that your husband? You look like a nice lady, why would you choose a black guy?*” They would say it right to our faces and I think that was totally outrageous!

*Emmanuel and Carol*

Emmanuel is a social advocate who is involved with various activities that promote awareness of asylum seekers and ethnic minorities among the Hong Kong community, as well as to fight against racial discrimination. His story has been featured in various media platforms and he often shares his personal experience with Hong Kong students and the general public in outreach activities. He is married to Carol, a Hong Kong woman who is passionate about the same social issue. Emmanuel introduced himself and his project:

I am Emmanuel, I have been staying in Hong Kong for 7 years now, and I am originally from Togo, somewhere in West Africa. I studied law back then, and I was an asylum seeker. I am the captain of the All Black Football Club, a program that bridges social and cultural differences between refugees, ethnic minorities and locals through the uniting power of sports. We always compete with different local football teams.

It seems like Hong Kong is a very multicultural place. But when you try to get close to them, get into their life, mingle with them and do things with them, that's where you feel *barriers*, they don't let you cross beyond that. But we do not want to stay isolated from the local community. It's not helping us, and at the same time it's not helping society.

Carol talked about how she met Emmanuel and described the experience:

In 2014, I joined a volunteer group that was hoping to connect asylum seekers, mainland students and local students through organizing different activities. The group at that time just started the production of a drama, and I first met him there. I gradually found that we made a good match. At the time, I was not working, and I still lived with my family. He had to move out of where he rented and had no idea what the next step

was. I did not know what to do, and I cried a lot for him. I was scared that he would have no place to go. At the moment, I felt so useless as his girlfriend – I failed to help him to get a place to live, which should be something very easy.

We always hung out, our relationship grew so naturally, we cannot remember how we started dating. We tried so hard to recall but still we can't seem to find the answer. As for the marriage, we decided to get married after seeing each other for around a year. Although my family did not accept it at first, we decided to get married, and fortunately we got their support and blessing at the end.

Having heard so many people expressing their oppositions or concerns with my relationship, I actually did not have many struggles. Because I know this person and I think he is the right one for me. The thing that I like him the most is that he has a high standard for himself, he takes care of our family, he is devoted to his religion. He won't do anything that is hurtful to others, and he considers carefully before doing anything. I want more people to know about this community, to know why they are in Hong Kong, to know about the unjust system.

One day, after Emmanuel played a football match, we took the MTR to go home. Luckily, we got seats. He felt quite tired, so he rested his head on my shoulder. I was just checking messages on my phone, and suddenly a middle-aged woman passed me a handwritten note with the phrase "*Beware of the Africans!*" I didn't know how to react. She saw me reading the note, then she left the train immediately. I was shocked and furious.

Mainstream media has already defined the meaning of being refugees, often associate them with negative stereotypes. Very few people would make the effort to get

to know them and understand the issues. Nowadays, cyberbullying is severe, it's very easy to be discouraged or even defeated if I do not have a stronger heart. It is very hard for black people to live in Hong Kong. Everyday life is already a challenge itself. Their skin color signifies their identity as outsiders. "We" as Hong Kongers or Asians are better and superior, and "they" are here to steal our resources and do crimes. Differentiating between "we" and "they" is human nature, it's also about how people understand themselves. I hope "they" can become part of "us" one day.

### **Liminal Status: Hong Kong Women Stepping Across the Line of Defining Normality**

For Hong Kong women who have a romantic relationship with black Africans, they experience a profound change in their identity, from a 'normal' person in the majority to an 'abnormal' person in the minority. It can be interpreted as a liminal status, "Liminal transitions dissolve social structures which regulate ordinary social interaction, removing limits from everyday life." (Boland 2013, 223) They experience struggles in expressing themselves and the relationship, as well as their daily life experience, and such transition can often be quite overwhelming for a Hong Kong woman who has never face discrimination in her life. These Hong Kong women have to experience what it feels like to be a black African person in Hong Kong, they have to face how the mainstream culture frames these Hong Kong girls as well as the relationship, they have to deal with the assumptions and stereotypes people have for them. These Hong Kong girls also realize the taken-for-granted privileges they had when they were still considered a part of the majority.

For the first time in my life, I realize living my everyday life at ease is a massive privilege. There are many other privileges that I had if I am dating an ethnically Hong Kong

Chinese person which is considered the norm in Hong Kong, such as expressing affection in most social situations and not expecting reactions made by other; receiving social acceptance from family members, neighbors, colleagues, and friends; seeing romance and relationships which are similar to mine being represented on movies and television shows; having role models who have the same type of relationship; assuming people won't ask, "is it true that the sex is better?" or other inappropriate questions. I am considered as an outsider, a Hong Kong woman who does not match the public expectation of what a Hong Kong woman should be in terms of who I am dating.

Rubin (1984) uses the charmed circle to demonstrate the hierarchy of sexuality, that "according to this system, sexuality that is 'good', 'normal', and 'natural' should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. ... Any sex that violates these rules is 'bad', 'abnormal', or 'unnatural'." (Rubin 1984, 152) The line between good sexuality and bad sexuality is very clear, although the boundary is a social, cultural, historical construct, it carries real and practical meanings in today's Hong Kong society that separates the dominant group and the minoritized group, denying the "bad" people numerous rights and opportunities that heterosexual people automatically possess... "As sexual behaviors or occupations fall lower on the scale, the individuals who practice them are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions." (Rubin 1984, 151)

Applying the theory to the discussion of African-Hong Kong couples, such a romantic relationship is regarded as a "bad" relationship in Hong Kong. Lisa would purposely keep distance with Roy so people would not stare at her. Sarah was frowned upon because her husband is black. Carol was warned to be aware of Africans. These experiences become an integral

part of their romantic experience and largely define their identity. The sense of unease in their everyday life reinforces how stigmatized such interracial relationships are in Hong Kong.

### **African as a “Thick” Identity in Hong Kong**

Ethnicity and race are clear markers of life experiences in Hong Kong. “Ethnicity and race are among the most common categories that contemporary human beings use to organize their ideas about who they are, to evaluate their experiences and behavior, and to understand the world around them.” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 12) Such political categorization sorts people into hierarchies, controlling what people can and cannot do in society. Hong Kong is a largely ethnically homogenous city. For most of the Hong Kong women, it is likely that they are surrounded by people of the same ethnicity at school, workplace, neighborhood. Being part of the dominant group, their ethnicity becomes subconscious and is often taken for granted, it also does not affect their life. However, for African men, when their distinct visual features are singled out, their ethnicity becomes what defines their social life, which is defined as a “thick identity” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007) that extensively influence one’s daily experience. Mainstream people often have negative assumptions about them purely based on their race, their identities are largely “assigned” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007) to them by the dominant group. However, they also have room to “assert” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007) their identity and resist forceful ascription and prejudice.

These African men have to face severe discrimination in Hong Kong and their identity is defined almost completely by their skin color. Shane, Roy and Emmanuel are all considered successful in their own countries, they each have a respectable career. They are at ease when they are in their homeland. However, their life in Hong Kong is filled with discrimination which

can be detrimental to their self-esteem and overall wellbeing. Their masculinity is considered dangerous and stigmatized which Hong Kong society is repulsing. As Emmanuel has mentioned, there is a constant barrier between Hong Kong people and African people. However, some of these African men have shown that they are not willing to resist. Emmanuel is often seen on various social media to raise awareness of ethnic minorities, Shane is willing to appear on a reality show of TVB, the most-watched television channel in Hong Kong, to share his authentic experience being with Sarah so as to let more local people understand these relationships. There are acts of resistance towards the unfavorable social conditions in Hong Kong.

### **3. Beyond Love: Practicalities**

A romantic relationship is not only about feelings or “love” which is a very vague and idealistic concept. Love is a social, cultural and political construct. If it is a serious and long-term relationship or even a marriage, it may imply many practical aspects in life such as sharing one’s income, building a family, and raising children. People often question the authenticity of love in the African-Hong Kong couples because of the assumption that the African man being able to benefit from the relationship. Also, even though Hong Kong is a relatively more gender-equal society, the husband is still expected to be the main breadwinner of the household. This puts a lot of pressure on African-Hong Kong couples because it is difficult for African men to find decent jobs if they are not from the upper-class background. It is quite common that these African men are accused of using Hong Kong women to get more money and resources in society.

#### **Family Being the Obstacle: Public vs. Private**

A monogamous romantic relationship involves two people. However, in Hong Kong culture, a romantic relationship is never only about the two people in the relationship, it also concerns the family and relatives. For African-Hong Kong couples, the resistance from the woman’s family is often the biggest obstacle for the relationship.

#### **To Be A “Good” Child to the Family**

In Hong Kong, the family is important for getting various supports, from emotional to financial support. Under the influence of Chinese culture, there are certain traditional Chinese values related to the family such as respecting elderly and filial piety which are still highly

relevant today. “Older generations of Chinese people were raised predominantly in an enclosed collectivistic context, mostly insulated from the influence of Western, individualistic cultures.” (Chen 2015, 168) There is a clear and distinct hierarchy based on age and generation, that the young should always respect and obey the old because the old has worked hard and provided for the young. It is important for the young to show gratefulness by following the hierarchy at home. For example, children should be respectful to their parents, work hard to make their parents proud, they are expected to take care of their parents when they grow up which is the spirit of filial piety. Children often want to get recognition from their parents by performing well at school, getting into college, pursue a well-paid job, which is a common definition of a successful child in Hong Kong. Young people are taught to obey their parents and try hard to fulfill their expectations. As a child of the family, there are roles that he or she has to fulfill in order to be considered a good child.

In recent years, there are terms and phrases such as “tiger moms” and “winning at the starting line” which are describing how some Hong Kong parents are pushing their children to excel at school. Some parents would send their children to tutorial classes after regular school hours, packing their schedule with numerous extra-curricular activities such as music, sports, languages and arts. The goal of these parents is very straight-forward: they want their children to have an edge when applying to prestigious schools, which means a ticket to a successful life. It is common that Hong Kong parents would want their children to live a prosperous life. It is also about winning the competition and being better than other people. This has become the culture of Hong Kong: competition is everywhere since the young age of a person. Everything can be compared such as test scores, schools, jobs, wealth, status, everything a person possesses, their family, friends, and relatives will judge. Hong Kong people have been raised in this culture and

understand that there are certain expectations that they have to fulfill if they want to be considered a useful person.

### **Family Influence on A Woman's Partner**

For a Hong Kong woman, who she chooses to date or marry is a big issue that people would care because it somehow reflects whether she has the ability and attractiveness to find a “good” man. This is the matter of “face”, a woman will have face when she finds a good man and will lose face when she fails to do so. Hsu (1996) wrote:

Chinese people generally have a serious concern with how they appear before others. In daily matters as well as in more consequential pursuits in life, they seek to create a favorable impression by letting others know of their qualities, capabilities, and achievements that are valued by society (such as the ability to acquire prize goods). To have a positive public image is, in the words of Chinese people, to have 'face'; to fail at this is to have no 'face.' (Hsu 1996, 2)

Romantic relationships are often not only a private matter, but also a public matter.

Reaching the age of adulthood, Hong Kong women are expected to start dating men, and people talk about this in their daily life. In the age of social media, many Hong Kong women post pictures about their romantic life, and their friends can comment and give blessings to the couple. In Hong Kong college culture, having a romantic relationship is considered one of the five things a college student must do before graduation (the other four are studying, living on campus, join a student association, and work part-time). This shows that culture has been encouraging and cultivating the publicization of one's romantic relationship.

It is not only about the face of the woman only, but the face of the whole nuclear family. It is rather an important issue for the family because it is something that relatives will talk about in family gatherings, that colleagues and other people who know the family will talk about. It is the culture that people bring up these topics to discuss in their family gatherings during Chinese

holidays such as Chinese New Year, Mid-autumn Festival, Ching Ming Festival. In these family gatherings, the woman is expected to attend with her boyfriend or husband, or at least to be prepared to talk about him. The importance of the everyday life experience of the Hong Kong woman is often overlooked. When a Hong Kong woman has a black African boyfriend, it can be quite emotionally draining for the woman whether to tell her parents about it, especially if the family is more conservative.

For Hong Kong women whose grandparents are still alive, it may be a tricky issue to introduce their African partner to them because old people in Hong Kong are likely to be more conservative. Since there is a generation difference in the experience between the old and the young (Chen 2015, 167), old people may find it harder to accept such unconventional pairing. In the past, Hong Kong was even more ethnically homogenous, the older generation had less chance to meet foreigners, unlike Hong Kong people nowadays who can have international experience relatively easier at schools and workplaces. Since grandparents are the oldest in the family, it is common in Hong Kong that people should respect their grandparents. This can be a big obstacle for these couples, especially when the grandparents and the parents have high expectations of the woman's choice of boyfriend or husband. It is especially a big problem when the African man is an asylum seeker since asylum seekers cannot work legally in Hong Kong.

## **Accounts**

### *Personal Account*

I always know my mom will not like that if I have a black boyfriend, she always jokes that I can date whoever I like except a black guy. When I was dating my boyfriend, I spent a lot of time with him, skipping many dinners with my family. In order not to

make it suspicious to my family, I had to make up many excuses for skipping dinners with them, for example, meeting my classmates to discuss the group project, hanging out with friends. My parents are not very strict, and I do not really have a curfew, that's why I think they didn't suspect anything. But one time, my father randomly said, "I think you are dating someone but just not telling us", which honestly scared me quite a bit. I was not mentally prepared to deal with their reactions if they know. Even though my father appears to be more liberal than my mom, but still I do not think he will welcome the idea of me dating an African guy very much.

I tried to test the water by bringing him up in the conversation with my family, saying that he was my friend from the department and we hanged out a lot, and I praised his knowledge in world affairs and his career achievements. My parents seemed quite impressed knowing that he was an asylum seeker but still managed to achieve so many things, but my parents constantly saw him as a black person instead of just a person. For example, my mom said, "he has advantages for being black because the company wants diversity". It seemed to be that the way they talked about him is always about his race. There was a period that I brought him up quite often in our conversations, and my mom said, "Don't bring home a black guy as your boyfriend." I was quite disappointed and said, "Don't worry, mom. He has a girlfriend already."

Knowing the personalities of my mom, I knew that it would be very hard to convince her. At that moment, I talked to my best friend about my dilemma, she told me not to worry too much, "it's not like you two are getting married now". Now my relationship with him has ended but I am still curious about how my mom would think, so I asked her again. This time she told me something which has nothing to do with race,

*“As a mom, of course I would want you to be happy and have a stable life with your partner if you ever get married. But you know Africans in Hong Kong, they usually do not earn a lot of money, I do not want you to suffer if you eventually marry a person who can’t make a living.”* I understand her concerns about my future happiness.

### *Carol and Emmanuel*

Carol recalled the first time she told her mom about her relationship with Emmanuel:

I remember when I first told my mom that I am dating him, my mom was so shocked, said that “What? It’s a black guy? He is a black person with *no identity, no money, no property*, why can he marry my daughter? Then I remember telling my family about marrying him, they had a lot of doubts and concerns. They were worried that I was deceived and used. They thought I was immature, and I couldn’t take care of myself. They were not at ease that I married an African man, they just assumed that these African refugees are not trustworthy, and they are chauvinistic, marrying him would mean suffering.

Emmanuel understood her family, “I don’t blame her parents and her family because it is normal, it’s out of care.” Then Carol continued:

When my mom expressed these sentiments, I thought to myself, we did so many exhibitions, drama plays, outreaching activities and school tours to let local people know more about refugees. But ironically, my family members who are closest to me do not know much about this community. This made me realize that our work to raise awareness and advocacy was nowhere near enough, and I was more determined to work harder.

Fortunately, my parents and Emmanuel met more and got to know each other, things got better. Now my mom cares about him a lot, she always buys stuff for him.

*Jenny*

Jenny is a 30-year-old Hong Kong woman who married a Nigerian guy who is 31 years old. They met in college and now are married for two years. Jenny has been born and raised in a middle-class family, studied at a local school. She and her husband are both working in rather high-paying jobs, she is a civil servant and she earns over HK\$30000 a month, and they have rented an apartment for their own family. She recalled how she got her family's approval of her partner at the beginning:

It was not that hard for me to tell my parents about my relationship, I always knew that my parents are more liberal. However, it was way harder to tell my grandparents. I didn't think they have ever met a black person in their life. Just as I expected, they were quite hesitant about the idea, saying things like "Do you want people to laugh at you? Do you want to have weird dark babies?" Of course, I was not going to give up my relationship just because my grandparents did not understand my partner, still I chose to marry him.

Fortunately, things got a lot better when I gave birth to my first daughter. The whole family welcomed the birth of the little girl, she really brought joy to the whole family. Before my daughter was born, her grandparents did not really want the baby to be black, they wanted a Chinese baby. But they changed their mind when they see my girl: she has big eyes, a cute smile, and now with curly hair, she is just adorable! She captures

the heart of the family, also she is well-tempered, she won't cry and scream all the time. I think that the baby is what drastically changes how her family views her relationship. Now, the family members are obsessed with my baby girl, and would like to spend every moment with her. The family members also became more accepting of my husband, starting to treat him as a real part of the family. Now, they always want me to bring him and our daughter to come over for dinner.

### **Implications of Having Children in a Chinese Family**

Children can be a turning point for many of these relationships because children are always imagined to be pure, innocent, and joyful. In Chinese culture, having a newborn baby is the family is always considered to be a fortunate event that needs to be celebrated. Children often resolve some of the conflicts in a family because the attention has been shifted from the problem to the wellbeing of the child. Also, having a child also implies a formation of a new nuclear family, and that the romantic relationship is stable. For these Afro-Chinese couples, the woman's parents and family members may have reservations at the earlier stage of the relationship, but the birth of a child has stabilized and strengthened the relationship, and at that moment, the identity of the African husband changed as well. He is not just the boyfriend anymore, but the father of the baby, which has linked him much closer to the family.

### **Is a relationship with an asylum seeker fake love?**

In today's Hong Kong, more male asylum seekers are seeking to marry Hong Kong resident female partners. Comments in the media and among authorities generally depict such a pursuit as driven by a desire to obtain legal status. Marrying a Hong Kong woman is virtually the

only way for them to live and work here, thereby these unions are thought to be dangerous and based on “fake love”. Echoing to the family’s concern, the financial aspect is one of the main reasons why Hong Kong families may oppose to their daughter having an African husband – they are concerned that the African man is not able to support the family, or worse, the Hong Kong woman has to bear the burden of providing for the family. The cases with asylum seekers in particular exemplify the issue because they are able to get many benefits if they are married to a Hong Kong woman.

### **Account**

#### *Louisa and Isaiah*

Isaiah is from The Gambia, he escaped to Hong Kong to seek asylum because of political persecution. Hong Kong government does not recognize refugees or provide asylum, asylum seekers are not allowed to work. They can only rely on a government subsidy of around \$3000 every month. He joined the All Black Football Club which is captained by Emmanuel. “Football is to bring people together, not to separate people.” Isaiah said.

Louisa talked about how she met Isaiah and how she viewed their relationship:

I had been watching All Black FC playing football for a year. I noticed him but I never knew his name, I only paid attention to his deadlocks. So, I called him “the dreadlocks guy”. We became friends when someone introduced me to him. I studied in the UK, I don’t think it weird or awkward to date a foreigner.

My family thinks that black people are criminals. Movies and reality shows keep telling people that they sell drugs, they kill people, they are not good for you, you can’t

even be friends with them. My family and friends were really worried about me, they said

that I should at least consider carefully first, what if he just wants to get a Hong Kong ID from me? But I never think of him like this because if the only thing he wants from me is the Hong Kong ID, he would not have done something that only a life partner would do. This is true love, and I don't mind giving him money every month.

Louisa would give Isaiah around HK\$3000 every month for daily expenses:

I think when we are together, we don't have to fuss about money, we don't have to mark down every transaction for our daily spending, that would be very tiring. *My money is his money, his money is my money.*

Louisa and Isaiah were excited to get married and move on to a new stage of life. They were at the marriage registry, waiting to sign the papers. However, an officer pulled Louisa away and asked her whether she was forced to marry him, whether she really wanted to marry an African guy. The officer went on telling her how bad African refugees are, and there are many refugees harming the safety of Hong Kong.

When they walk on the street together, they always attract people's attention.

People, especially elderlies, like to stare at us and scan us from the top to the bottom. It really is awkward. One time, Isaiah was surrounded by mainland tourists and they were taking pictures of him, they were exclaiming that they had never seen a black person before. I was furious, I told him that he didn't have to condescend to them. But he said that he was used to it. I felt for him, I can't believe that some Chinese people can be that ignorant about African people. That's why I am really glad that my mom is willing to accept him, and also to learn about African culture. I actually changed my family's mind, they feel more positive about black people now.

Isaiah said that he is used to these treatments from people in Hong Kong. The first day he arrived, he took a bus and got seated. The middle-aged woman beside him immediately covered his nose and left. He deeply felt the pain of being discriminated against and realized that his life in Hong Kong would not be easy.

He talked about how he feels about these assumptions:

This is what some girls would think, if you want to have a Chinese girl, you want her for something. Like to have a permit to work here legally, to do your things. But this is a serious relationship. I hope that I can work in Hong Kong and feed my family.

Anywhere you go, you go to the UK or the US, people are getting married, interracial marriage is everywhere.

Louisa owns a small boutique, Isaiah often helps out at the shop. They live in a small apartment in Hong Kong Island, they own a pet dog. But Isaiah does not have much to do usually:

I cannot work because of my status, my life is extremely boring. I always have nothing to do except for watching football matches at home or playing football with my friends. In African culture, an adult man has to be independent after graduation. I have the responsibility to take care of my family, I should be working and making money. But now I am always doing nothing, sometimes I stay at home all day long. If I am used to this lifestyle, it would be very difficult to change. Maybe I won't be able to wake up early to work in the future, maybe my body will be used to such a lazy lifestyle. I don't want this, this is very frustrating.

### **Defying Hypergamy**

A Hong Kong woman marrying an African man is often considered “marry down” which is not desirable in the Hong Kong context. “Chinese-African marriages do not follow the conventional principle of hypergamy: women marrying up, widely acknowledged as the standard pattern of marriage throughout much of the world.” (Mathews, Lin and Yang 2017, 203)

Marriage is associated with owning an apartment and even owning a vehicle which are economic considerations because forming a family requires a lot of money and planning beforehand. Men are expected to provide good living conditions to their wife and possibly children if they decide to have them. However, in many cases of African-Hong Kong couples, it is often the opposite where the woman is earning more than the man. Take Louisa as an example, she gives Isaiah HK\$3000 every month which is unimaginable by many local people. Men are still expected to be the one who takes care of the family even though Hong Kong is a liberal city.

Whether it is real or fake love, practical economic concerns are an integral part of these relationships. Love is a subjective feeling that it is hard to be measured by outsiders. The ideals of love are not natural but are socially constructed that fit into the gender norms of the particular culture.

#### **4. Cultural Differences in the Relationship**

As a romantic relationship between an African man and a Hong Kong woman is fundamentally an interracial and intercultural relationship, there can be challenges in how they each interpret the relationship as well as the gender roles. Rather than comparing the two cultures and make a value judgment, this part aims to analyze some of the possible cultural clashes in an African Chinese relationship.

##### **Different Gender Roles**

In a heterosexual relationship, there are numerous expressions of gender norms in daily life experience, the man and the woman each have gendered expectations exerted on them by society, and they each expect their partner to behave according to these norms to a certain extent. Hong Kong is a relatively more gender-equal society compared to a lot of cultures in the world, which is not implying that there is no sexism in Hong Kong. But still women enjoy equal access and opportunities to education, career, public service, etc. Since a young age, female students are taught that they can have their personal goals and dream in a career. They have the autonomy to think for themselves and express themselves in various settings. Although women are still expected to do housework, they have the opportunities to pursue their own goals. In this culture, women tend to have their own voice rather than positioning themselves as inferior to men.

There are not many Hong Kong women who are willing to be full-time housewives, especially for women from a middle-class background who receive tertiary education. Being also the breadwinner at home, women have a financial basis to speak up for themselves instead of listening to the husband only. Hong Kong women tend to be strong believers of monogamy since it has been the social ideal, and this may induce some behaviors like checking on their partners and expecting to be given a schedule of what their partner is doing. It would be an inaccurate generalization for all Hong Kong women because there are different degrees of power differentiation between the man and the woman in relationships, but still Hong Kong women tend to have their own opinions and they are generally not afraid to express it to the man. Hong Kong women want a relationship that the man and the woman can have a similar level of power that allows them to pursue their individuality.

However, for African men, these qualities are not necessarily the things they desire in a woman. In African cultures, women are expected to be responsible for household chores, and they should listen to their husbands. Rather than comparing the two cultures and saying that the Hong Kong culture is more gender-equal, the two cultures have a drastically different understanding of what “respecting” a woman means. In Hong Kong, a woman is allowed to speak in both the public and private settings, while in African cultures, women are expected to let the men take the lead in public. African men also find that in a relationship, men should dominate as in making decisions, financially providing for the family, taking care of the wife. As I have been talking to some African men, they always like to joke that “Hong Kong women like to slap their boyfriends!”, maybe they are influenced by a viral video a few years ago that a woman was seen slapping her boyfriend on the street while the boyfriend was kneeling. Also,

they kept telling me that Hong Kong women are too controlling, that they kept checking on their boyfriends.

It seems that there is a mismatch between African men and Hong Kong women, but it is always difficult to discuss gender norms in a society because there are numerous internal differences within a gender group in a society, there are factors like social class, education level, personal experience that influence how a romantic relationship evolves. But, since there is an obvious discrepancy between what a woman should be in both cultures, cultural clashes are possible in such relationships. Not implying that one culture is superior to another one, both the African man and Hong Kong woman must learn how to compromise and adapt to the differences, otherwise there will be many misunderstandings.

### **Account**

#### *Sarah and Shane*

Sarah explained how difficult life was when Shane was in Hong Kong.

As a black guy, it was really difficult for him to find a decent job in Hong Kong. He could only do his own business, but when it was getting harder to do his business, he started to think about leaving Hong Kong and going back to his hometown. At that time, he had got a good business opportunity at home. I was struggling to make a decision but in the end I chose to come with him. He is now operating a second-hand vehicle store, importing and selling second-hand cars from China which earns quite a lot by the standard here. His friends think he is successful, and he finally has his dignity back. He is obviously way happier here, that happiness is from his heart. His depression from Hong Kong gradually disappears.

Shane said, “I was surprised, I thought maybe she wanted to stay in Hong Kong. This is one of the best things ever happened to me, I can’t be thankful enough to her. She made my dream come true.”

Sarah is driven, speaks her own mind, all in all a strong woman. Shane is chauvinistic, likes to control everything. Both of them have an aggressive personality which undoubtedly clashes, and they argue a lot. Shane shared his view on this:

You know, people I know in Nigeria believe that men should be in control of everything. Hong Kong ladies are more independent compared to Nigerian women, it was very shocking for me when we went on our first date. It was the first time for me to experience something like that. We went out for dinner, and after dinner, she paid for herself. I didn’t know how to deal with it. So, we sort of argued about it.

Sarah did not understand Shane’s culture until she moved to Nigeria. Sarah went on to share her view on this:

Their “big man-ness” (a Cantonese term referring to an alpha male who makes all decisions and would like their woman to listen to him) is extraordinary. Women have a very low social status here, they are subordinate to men. I can tell this from the female domestic workers at home. When my husband is at home, they are so obedient. But when he is not here, they are rude to me and they don’t respect me. But my husband suddenly returns, and their facial expressions immediately change. In their culture, they think the man is the boss. Women here look down on women in general and they obey the men completely. Whatever the men say, they would say yes.

It is a patriarchal country – an extremely patriarchal one. Nigerian men like women who are gentle, tamed, obedient, this is the number one quality. If a woman is not gentle or obedient, it is not good even if she is very pretty. Nigerian men think they are born to be kings. My husband actually feels sorry that he married me, haha. I believe in mutual respect, I am not a yes woman who obeys everything the husband says. So, when we started dating, our personalities clashed, and we argued a lot. If something is not right, I speak up. What's wrong with speaking up? How can we solve the problem if we keep our feelings to ourselves? But he would think that I am challenging his authority.

When we were in Hong Kong, I wanted our kids to study at a local school so that they could learn Chinese. But my husband strongly opposed it, he said “these are my children, I get to decide that they should study at an international school and learn English. This is my decision, you only need to listen! *I am not Chinese, I am not soft!*” I shouted at him, “*You married the wrong woman!*”

It was really difficult and upsetting during the adjusting period, I almost wanted to divorce him in the first few years of the marriage. In a quarrel, he could be very cruel and said hurtful words. I was seriously thinking about whether to divorce him or to continue the marriage, that was after I gave birth to my first child. I was thinking, we just got married and I just gave birth to a child, but you treated me like this in quarrels, do you even care about me at all? I was really hurt, but I had no one to talk to. I would never tell my family about this. At first, my father did not like him, not because of his personality but it's his race. I chose to marry him, I chose this path and I have to bear the consequences myself.

However, even at the lowest of the marriage, Shane did not want to have a divorce and would make the effort to reconcile. Also, because of the kids, Sarah chose to stay in the marriage. After moving to Nigeria and got to learn about Shane's cultural background, Sarah finally started to understand her husband:

When we were in Hong Kong, there was a time that our relationship had hit rock bottom. Whatever he did, he annoyed me so much, and he would not explain himself, he is not the type who would explain. But when we moved here, because this is his motherland, he became more patient to explain to me why he would do certain things, and how things work here. There were many things that I did not understand and never imagined, but after coming here, I started to have a sense. Because we have better communication now, we have fewer misunderstandings.

They are obedient, obey whatever the husband says. When a Hong Kong man marries a Hong Kong woman, he has to be a "small man". But if he marries a Nigerian woman, he can be the "big man". In Nigeria, men are like kings. They think they can do whatever they want and get away with it because they know you cannot just walk out of the marriage. People here keep telling that Shane is nice, hard-working, playful, he is every woman's dream, that's why I am lucky. He bears the responsibility to take care of me and the family, which is quite rare here because many men would ignore their wife after getting married, and they would not work very hard.

Social settings are treated as competitions, to see which husband takes care of his wife the best and which family is wealthier. If a woman doesn't dress well, the man will be embarrassed (lose face). When I feel upset outside my home, I have to learn to tolerate

it. Many relatives would ask Shane to lend them money. Actually, not to lend, but to give them money. Be it US\$100 or US\$1000. Because Shane is seen as a rich man as he returned home from a foreign country, and he is expected to take care of his relatives. Why is their burden placed on my husband's shoulder? I was furious about this, but I had to tolerate especially in front of his family. As his wife, if I speak up openly about it, it would be extremely humiliating for him. No matter how angry I am, no matter how ridiculous the matter is, I have to shut my mouth. It's another thing to yell at home.

We were at a party and we were in a hurry to leave. But I could not just go up to my husband and ask him to leave directly, otherwise other men would think that he is dominated by his wife. Even if he has nothing left to do, he would deliberately stay there. Therefore, I would call his phone, and when he sees it is me calling me, he would find an excuse to leave.

I think for many Hong Kong women who marry foreign guys, it is easy for us to treat the Hong Kong way of doing things in the right way and we take it for granted, often neglect the fact that the man is from another country with a unique culture and values. I started to realize this when I moved here, and I got to know their culture is like this by being a member of this community

### **Different Expectations on the Nature of the Relationship**

In different cultures, a romantic relationship may have a different meaning and implication. Whether it is serious or casual, how much time do people date before conforming on the relationship, how people court... These are often overlooked when the two people are from

the same culture, but these taken-for-granted ideas on romantic relationships will be revealed when it is an intercultural relationship.

### **Account**

#### *Laura*

Laura was born into a middle-class family in Hong Kong, her father is a film director, her mother is a senior civil servant. She studied Business Administration at university, and she worked as a management trainee at a well-known food company. These are the standards of success for a Hong Kong student and basically, she has a life that many Hong Kongers would be jealous of. However, she thought to herself, “Maybe I can make food taste better, but there are many people starving in this world.” She wanted to help poor people in developing countries. Therefore, she was determined to turn things around, and decided to quit her job and study Master of International Relations in the US. After graduation, she was hired by a US non-governmental organization to work in Rwanda. It was a long-term job, she lived there for 2.5 years. She talked about the culture there:

As a foreigner, when you walk on the street in Africa, people would see you like a stack of cash, literally your face says money. Sometimes I wonder whether I should blame them for stealing, or I should expect such danger. When I was in Rwanda, the residential building I lived in got robbed twice. My friend lost her computer, mobile phone and camera. I think there was a danger, but one should be able to bear the risk when we choose to do something.

Rwandans are more introverted among the ethnic groups in East African countries. They are quieter, it's hard for them to start a conversation with others. They are

unwilling to open up and get close to others easily, this is largely because of the Rwandan genocide. During that period, the person who sat next to you, his mother could be the one who killed your father. I understand why trust is so hard to build there. When I was doing home visits, I could not even take my water bottle out of my bag. I dared not to drink water in front of them because they did not even have adequate drinking water. When there were numerous moments like this, it was really hard to establish friendships with them.

It was quite hard to make new friends, and I was the first Asian employee there while the other foreign employees were mostly from Europe or the US. My friends were mainly my co-workers, it was both good and bad. I already spent long hours with them from Monday to Friday, we even spent our leisure time together. Yes, when I went downtown during the weekends, I could make some new friends. But we were far away on the weekdays, it was hard to get close to them. Under this circumstance, unless I date my co-workers, otherwise it was nearly impossible to get a boyfriend. At first, I was not fond of dating applications. But having to spend a long time there, I had to download it and gave it a go.

I met a Rwandan man who was my colleague. Though we did not have a direct co-working relationship, we had a chance to get to know each other in friendly gatherings. We got along well and could talk about different things, then we started dating. However, this relationship only lasted for a few months. He was too serious, and it scared me. We were only together for around a week, then he told me, “I am really serious about this, I am thinking we will get married after a year.” I am not the kind of person who is not serious about love, but this made me feel so pressured. I was not sure

whether I could stay in Rwanda for my whole life, and I wasn't sure whether this person is willing to travel to different places with me. If I would like to return to Hong Kong or to go to another country, I was not sure whether he would be willing to or has the ability to go with me. After considering very carefully, I decided that I was not able to promise him the future at such an early stage of the relationship. Then we ended the relationship, but we are still good friends until today.

Actually, it is quite normal for Rwandans to get married at 23 or 24, so now when I look back, it can be understood why my ex-boyfriend who was 30 at that time was in a hurry. Also, Rwandans are more introverted, they won't open up and express themselves easily. I think communication is key, and I could not understand him when he did not tell me directly.

### **Expectations on Sex in Relation to Monogamy**

Sex is a rather sensitive topic in the discussion of African-Hong Kong couples in Hong Kong because of the stereotype that African men have bigger penises which cause them to be better at sex. People may have the assumption that in such relationships, the African man will be the one initiating sex all the time, but through talking to some African guys<sup>4</sup>, I have learned a different story. There was a case that the Hong Kong woman keeps track of how often she and the African guy have sex. If the frequency decreases, the woman would think that the guy is cheating on her and he is having sex with another woman. Sex, for that particular woman,

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<sup>4</sup> I joined a discussion session with asylum seekers which was taken place in Chungking Mansions on February 16, 2019. The session was led by Professor Gordon Mathews.  
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becomes an indicator of whether the relationship is going well, and it also reflects that the woman is concerned whether the African man is seeing other women.

The expectation of a monogamous relationship can be quite different for both cultures. It is quite common that the Hong Kong women who date African men are easily concerned that whether they are having an affair. This phenomenon may have different explanations, but one of the explanations can be that, in African culture, men approach women proactively and often aggressively because they have a sense that women are weak and need protection. Therefore, during courtship, they have the mentality that they always have to be the ones to chase the women and it is reflected in their activeness in courting women. This is very different from many Hong Kong men who tend to be more reserve in their language and behavior. Hong Kong women tend to find African men more confident and masculine in this sense, which may lead to more suspicions whether the African men are doing the same thing to many other women. The cultural differences between the two cultures lead to such interesting dynamics within the relationships which may result in some conflicts such as the Hong Kong woman being too controlling and the African man being too flirty.

Cultural differences in terms of religious beliefs also play a role in different expectations on monogamy. Linessa Lin Dan, a PhD student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong researching Afro-Chinese relations in Guangzhou, says:

Many African men who propose already have wives in their home countries - Muslims are permitted by their religion to take multiple spouses. Furthermore, I have heard tales of husbands returning to Nigeria on a business trip, leaving a mobile-phone number that doesn't connect and disappearing. The Chinese wife is left with their children, and shamed for marrying a *hei gui* [black ghost]. (Marsh 2014)

Therefore, racism is not the only reason that these relationships face obstacles, cultural differences play a significant role in shaping people's expectations.

## **Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?**

Romantic relationships between African men and Hong Kong women reflect a lot of taken-for-granted values that have been deeply rooted in the minds of many Hong Kong people. It is hard for these couples to live a normal life in Hong Kong since they have been highly stigmatized, although the younger generations seem to be more accepting. 10 years from now, I wonder if there will be a great shift of public perception of these relationships comparing to today, and whether black people are further integrated a part of the Hong Konger community. This is a project fundamentally concerning the daily life experience with these couples, whether they can live their lives at ease, and this greatly depends on whether general Hong Kong people are willing to accept foreignness and whether they are willing to expand the definition of being a

Hong Konger. This is something that concerns all ethnically Chinese Hong Kongers because there will always be people from other countries and regions coming to Hong Kong, or local people who are not Chinese. How ethnically Chinese people being the majority treats the minority will greatly impact the future of this international city.

### **Changing Attitudes Towards Africans**

How can these romances come to be seen as ‘normal’ in Hong Kong? Racism is still an important factor in determining that. The recent anti-ELAB movements in 2019 have given us new insights to the question “who can be considered Hong Kongers?” Despite facing discrimination, some Africans took part in the movement because they want to connect Hong Kongers. Social movements often temporarily set aside the differences that people have and intensify the sense of togetherness. “But just look here: we don’t care what race you are. [Other protesters] just look at us and they will hand you like a towel and ask: ‘Are you hot? Do you need a mask? Do you need eye protection?’ People will just help you, they don’t care.” (Chor 2019) Race and ethnicity are no longer that determining for ethnic minorities because they are all Hong Kongers striving for the same goals in this movement, which is considered to be the marker of a “real” Hong Konger at the moment.

Ethnically Chinese Hong Kongers are more aware of the presence of ethnic minorities in this movement. Notably, in order to thank the contributions made by ethnic minorities in the movement, many ethnically Chinese Hong Kongers visited Chungking Mansions which has been a place where many ethnic minorities do business and feared by locals. “This event does not fully depict a diminishment of Hong Kong racism, but rather a shift. A shift in Hong Kong’s “ethnic other.” South Asians and Africans are no longer that “ethnic other”; instead it is the

mainland Chinese.” (Mathews 2019) Especially the younger generation shows more open-mindedness toward Africans because of they have more opportunities to be in touched with ethnic minorities through school activities, and they are more likely to have received multicultural education. For example, as a college student, I have connections from African countries that I made in classes and extra-curricular activities. My university is active in promoting intercultural activities that allow students to learn more about ethnic minorities.

### **It Is A Long Road to Being Normal**

However, even though Africans are being viewed more positively by ethnically Chinese people, there is no significant change in accepting African-Hong Kong couples. There are various aspects of everyday life and there are different levels of acceptance on each of them. According to the survey conducted by Hong Kong Unison (2012), 63.4% of respondents indicated acceptance towards having Africans in their neighbourhood, 69.8% would accept being colleagues with Africans, 69.8% would accept Africans as their classmates at schools. These numbers seem promising. However, these aspects of life are less intimate, and they will not have a close relationship with Africans in the scenario. When it comes to making friends, 70.3% would accept Africans being their friends. But the percentage dropped significantly when respondents are asked about the acceptance of marrying Africans. Only 18.6% of the respondents indicated acceptance for that.

While it seems that the younger generation is more open-minded towards Africans having the Hong Konger identity in theory, there are disparities in practice when it comes to actually having Africans participating in their daily life. Having a romantic relationship or even getting married with a person is considered to be one of the closest forms of relationship that one could

have, and the ideals of a spouse are largely constructed by the social norms in Hong Kong. At this stage, Africans are still not considered ideal partners because of racism that has existed for a long time in Hong Kong. However, there is progress of accepting Africans in other aspects of life, it takes a longer time to progress to the point that it is considered normal to have an African boyfriend or husband. Based on the recent movements in Hong Kong, many Hong Kong people embrace anyone who shares the sentiments of fighting for freedom and democracy. Maybe that will become the defining factor of who gets to be a Hong Konger instead of one's skin color.

### **How Can These Relationships Be Successful?**

Communication is key in these relationships because of the intercultural nature. As the two people have distinctly different understandings and expectations on the relationship, it may be frustrating to see the other person does not act the way you normally act. Just like Sarah, she did not understand why Shane had to be so chauvinistic and disregarded women's abilities. However, after she explores the Nigerian culture, she understands why Shane would act the way he does. Cultural awareness is crucial for making these relationships work and the couple has to take the time to figure things out together. It would not be wise to assume things without asking because having an intercultural relationship is a learning process itself.

Determination is the most important quality to have in order to make these relationships work. It is mentally challenging to face assumptions and discrimination in everyday life for both the Hong Kong woman and the African man. As a Hong Kong woman who dated an African man, the relationship was exhausting for me as I had to deal with how people might think of me. The sense of unease I experienced whenever I was hanging out with him was overbearing. However, there are more and more couples who are willing to share their love story on various

media platforms, allowing more Hong Kong people to know their experiences. Things are getting better but still it takes time for society to accept these couples, therefore these couples have to have courage to face these challenges. Therefore, when I talk to my informants, I really admire the effort they put into understanding each other, as well as staying strong against prejudice. There is no perfect love. There are only people who try to make things work despite all the obstacles.

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