

# AIS General Research Fund (GRF) and Early Career Scheme (ECS) Success Round 2019-20

## **Project Title:**

Women and Birth in Transition: The Politics of Childbirth Medicalization in Reform era China

## **Brief Abstract:**

In the last one hundred years, childbirth practices in China were increasingly subject to biomedical interventions and technologies. This process of medicalization was accelerated in the second half of the 20th century due to the expansion of the country's hospital infrastructure and its family planning bureaucracy. Between 2008 and 2014, the average cesarean rate was as high as 32.9%, more than double the rate recommended by the World Health Organization. This project is one of the first qualitative research projects in the social sciences to approach this cesarean epidemic from the perspective of pregnant women. Most existing studies of childbirth in post-1990s China attribute the rise in cesarean rates to increasing demand from women. This project argues that this demand should not be conceptualized as a matter of individual choice but should be analyzed in the context of a larger political economy of childbirth medicalization, population governance, and healthcare marketization. Drawing on ethnographic research in rural and urban areas in Guangdong province, this project approaches the dynamics of decision-making leading to birth as a collective process of negotiation that is shaped not just by state actors and medical authorities, but also by women's own families and networks of support. Theoretically, the project joins recent anthropological debates on reproductive technologies and social change, while making a contribution to social science studies of childbirth medicalization and population governance.

**Investigator:** Dr Jun ZHANG (PI) & Dr. Gonçalo Santos (Co-I)

## **Biography:**

First trained as a lawyer and then an anthropologist, Dr ZHANG Jun is interested in social transformation through urban governance, politics of infrastructure and space, material culture, and class relationship. Her book "Driving toward Modernity: The Car and the Lives of the Middle Class in Contemporary China" (Cornell University Press, 2019) examines the mutual rises of the middle class and the automotive regime in contemporary urban China. She is currently working on a book manuscript (with Dr. Gonçalo Santos) on the emerging philanthropic practices in the context of rising inequality. Zhang's next project, which has received funding from the ECS scheme, takes the spatial metamorphosis of Canton/Guangzhou as a way to understand the socio-economic and political transformations in China in the Republican era.

Dr. Gonçalo SANTOS is Professor Auxiliar of Social-Cultural Anthropology in the Department of Life Sciences at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. He was trained in social-cultural anthropology and social studies of science and technology, and he has conducted extensive ethnographic research in China and Southeast Asia. His work explores the impact of larger forces of technocratic modernisation on the lives of ordinary families and communities, proposing new approaches to questions of modernity, subjectivity, and social and technological transformation.