Transnational Migration, Gender, and Work: Exploring the Experience of Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the conceptualization of migration and the notion that immigrants uproot themselves from their country of origin to be incorporated into any society and culture (Handlin 1973; Takaki 1993) has been challenged. As globalization intensifies, the concept of transnational migration has emerged. Transnational migration is “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Schiller; Basch; Blanc; and Szanton 1995), and transmigrants are “immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state” (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a; Basch et al. 1994).

Some social scientists have argued that transnationalism is not a new phenomenon. Others contend that transnational migration is one form of globalization. Levitt (2001), for example, maintains that the forms of transnationalism or transnational processes have changed in response to globalizing changes in communications and transportation technology, an expanding international division of labour, new global forms of culture, and devolving international and national policies and practices regarding citizenship.

In the last decade, much literature has been written on transnationalism and transnational migration. There are also increasing social science research which paid attention to the intersections of gender and transnational migration. These studies contend that gender relations are often transformed through transnational migration. However, transnationalism is not inherently transgressive or emancipatory. Rather, the effects are contradictory and complex, and must be assessed in specific time and space.

In this paper, I explore the relations of transnational migration processes to skilled Chinese immigrant women, their families and communities. I argue that Chinese immigrant women’s productive and reproductive work and their contradictory nature is paramount in the social construction of transnational families and communities. I demonstrate that new immigrants adopt transnational migration practices in separate geographical spaces (such as China and Canada) as a strategy to negotiate paid work and household work in the context of globalization and neoliberal restructuring, with its polarizing effects along axis of gender, ethnicity, race, and class.

My analysis of the data is informed by the notion that ethnicity, race, gender and class as socially constructed relations which have to do with how people relate to each other through productive and reproductive activities (Ng, 1993). Ethnicity, Race, gender, and class are not fixed, distinct, unitary entities that operate separately but must be
conceptualized as intersecting, fluid and dynamic, and subject to temporal and spatial fluctuations. They appear in divergent forms in different social and historical periods.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I describe who the Chinese immigrant women in Canada are. In the second part of the paper, I examine transnational migration in the Chinese community historically, and finally, I present empirical data to illustrate transnational migration and the experience of recent Chinese immigrant women in Canada.

2. Who are the Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada?
There is a tendency for Social scientists to treat a particular ethnic group as homogenous, while ignoring the differences amongst the group members. For example, there has been little recognition that Chinese women have different experiences than Chinese men, nor is there acknowledgement that the Chinese come from diverse social, cultural, economic, political locations, different geographical sites and sexual orientations, and they speak various dialects. These differences have resulted in their fragmentation into different communities, with their divergent geo-political affiliations, national allegiance, and linguistic, religious and cultural practices. These communities have divergent views, and they struggle against each other for limited resources and recognition. But they come together as a group in their struggle against racism and other forms of oppression, most notably, in petitioning the Canadian government to redress the historical discriminatory measures of imposing the head tax and the Chinese Exclusionary Act on the Chinese.

In this presentation, I focus on two groups of Chinese immigrant women in Canada: those from Hong Kong, and those from Mainland China. The Hong Kong Chinese immigrant women differ from those from Mainland China as they have lived in different social, political and economic systems. While Hong Kong immigrants have lived in a capitalist system under colonial rule for ninety-nine years, people from Mainland China have lived under a communist regime. In general, the HK women are more affluent, and had personal assets prior to immigrating to Canada in comparison to their counterparts from China.

But the immigration policy, in selecting only the highly educated and “skilled” professionals, ensuring that those Chinese who are admitted are from middle-class backgrounds, regardless of whether they are from China, Hong Kong, or other countries.

Other discriminatory measures such as employer’s requirement of “Canadian experience”, the lack of recognition of international degrees and the laborious process of recertification of internationally trained professionals also have a homogenizing effect on the new immigrants, rendering immigrants’ previous experiences in their home countries obsolete.

Even though many of the Chinese immigrant women professionals in my study are highly educated and trained, many enter Canada as dependents of their husbands who are the principal applicants under the Independent/economic class category. This is due to the fact that “skill” is “constructed and negotiated through ideological and political processes”
Gender biases in definitions of education, work, and skill mean that women’s skills and personal qualities are either excluded or undervalued.

Hence the immigration processes reproduces and structures inequality within the family by rendering one spouse (typically the wife) legally dependent on the other (Ng, 1993). This gender differentiation in immigration status (principal applicant versus dependents) indicates the structural difference between male and female immigrations with regard to their occupation and status in their home country as well as in Canada.

**Methodology**

The data for my presentation is drawn from an exploratory research project I have conducted to examine the implication of Chinese immigrant women in precarious work in Canada. The research was supported by the SSHRC Small Grant and the Atkinson Minor Research Grant. I employed “institutional ethnography” methodology, and placed Chinese immigrant women as the subject of the inquiry (Ng, 1993). The analysis linked these women’s accounts to the larger historical, social, economic, and political processes in society in which their experiences are embedded.

Since 1987, the Chinese have constituted the largest immigrant group entering Canada. As a result of the increasing emphasis on recruiting skilled professionals to Canada, a high percentage of recent immigrants who are admitted come under this category. For example, in 1997, 59 percent of immigrant from China, and 53 percent of those from Hong Kong were skilled workers. By 2000, the skilled immigrants from China had climbed to 75 percent, while those from Hong Kong had dwindled to 30 percent.

Contrary to the assertion that the new economy requires a highly skilled labour, these skilled Chinese immigrant women’s opportunity in the paid labour market do not fare well in the new political and economic environment.

Since the 1980s, the Canadian welfare state has been drastically eroded and replaced by the neoliberal state that valorizes the private over the public (Jessop, 1993). Neoliberal restructuring has served to marginalize immigrants (Shields, 2002). The dismantling of social support programs and the fostering of highly bifurcated labour markets undermine immigrants’ ability to successfully integrate into their host society. As a result, this segment of the population becomes highly susceptible to the problems of social exclusion. In the new labour market, immigrants, and in particular immigrant women of colour are increasingly being used as “flexible” and disposable labour, suited to the demands of the globalized economy (de Wolff, 2003; Vosko et al, 2003).

**3. Transnational Migration in Chinese Communities: Historical and Contemporary Processes**

Transnational migration is not new, nor is it the purview of rich business migrants. Historically, Chinese transnational communities evolved in Canada as a response to gendered and racialized policies and practices.
During the early periods of Chinese immigration to Canada, many racially discriminatory measures such as the head tax and the Chinese Exclusionary Act were imposed on the Chinese but not on Western European immigrants.

Prior to 1885, Chinese labourers were admitted into Canada to work on the railways and the mines. The Canadian government prohibited Chinese women from entering Canada to prevent the proliferation of the Chinese population. This measure effectively reduced the reproductive activities of the Chinese and hence the formation of Chinese families in Canada. When the head tax was imposed in 1885, it further deterred the Chinese labourers from bringing their wives and children to Canada. In 1885, when the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed, a head tax of $50 was levied on every Chinese who entered Canada. The Canadian state’s intention was to deter poor labourers from entering Canada. By 1921, the head was increased to $500 (Li 1998). To further deter Chinese immigration, the Chinese Immigration Act was introduced in 1923 which stipulated that no Chinese was allowed to enter Canada. During the Chinese exclusionary period between 1923 and 1947, virtually no Chinese women came into Canada. Consequently, a bachelor society amongst the Chinese was created.

Because of the sex ratio imbalance, some Chinese men who could afford it, went back to China in order to get married. But the exorbitant head tax and the racist environment in Canada prevented them from bringing their wives back to Canada with them. Consequently, these married Chinese labourers had to endure a lonely bachelor's life in Canada, while their wives and children were left to live a separate life in China.

Hence a transnational separate spheres of productive and reproductive work was created. Chinese men worked as labourers in Canada, and send remittances back to their wives and children, while the wives lived lonely “widow like” existence, tending to household work and caring for children.

Periodically, when the husband had saved up sufficient money, he would return to China to visit his family. As late as 1951, there remained in Canada 12,882 "separated" families versus 2,842 "intact" families in the Chinese community (Li 1988:67, Table 4.4).

Transnational migration practices which started in more recent years occurred under slightly different circumstances. Many transnationals were recent immigrants who were skilled professionals in their home country, and some are affluent businessmen. Despite their skills, many immigrant women’s employment opportunities are predicated on labour market conditions as well as gendered and racialized institutional processes.

In recent years, the downward leveling effect of restructuring, privatization, and deregulation has aggravated labour market conditions by lowering wages and fostering part-time, insecure, contingent employment. This has a polarizing effect along gender, race, ethnicity and class lines. Predictably, immigrant women’s employment has been adversely affected.
As well, the devaluation of international credentials and experience has been seen by some as rooted in the nature of capitalism (Mojab, 2000; Shields, 1996). Regardless of education and experience, immigrants are treated as a source of cheap labour and relegated to low paid, menial positions. These positions are often precarious, with part-time, flexible hours, and no security or benefits and employment in these sectors is a highly gendered and racialized phenomenon (Cranford & Vosko, 2003; De Wolff, 2003; Vosko et al., 2003; Galabuzi, 2001; Ornstein, 2000). Li (2000) contends that the central issue is not so much a problem of individual employer decisions but of labour market discrimination.

Below is how one woman from China talked about her labour market experience. This woman was a medical doctor in China, but her qualification was not recognized in Canada. As a result, she was terribly deskilled, and had to take whatever job she could get.

I was a doctor [in China] for 8 years. During the first days after I came here I worked 4 days at a garment factory. I walked in one of the factories close to where I lived and got the job. The salary was paid by piece, about 10 cents per piece. The first day I only made 200 pcs. I quit the job very soon. Later I got a telemarketing job in a friend’s company and was paid $7.50 per hour. Now during the weekends I’m still working for this company, although I got another part time job in a physiotherapy clinic as an assistant, $10 per hour. My job is to prepare medical material and do some cleaning. (FGM:N3)

Another Mainland Chinese women who has a degree in mechanical engineering in China and who worked as a machine operator in Toronto concurred:

For the first three months, I was paid $9 per hour. After three months, it has been increased to $10 per hour. After another 3 months, the pay will be increased to $10.50 per hour, and I can enjoy health insurance…the management of the factory is smart. A lot of employees are university graduates [from China]. So they did not emphasize the “Canadian experience”, as it is just labour work. (IM:N3)

The women in my studies echoed the difficulties that other immigrant women of colour have voiced, i.e. the requirement of “Canadian experience”, employers’ reluctance to recognize immigrant women’s qualifications and experience from their own countries, and racism in the labour market (George, 1998; Man, 1997). Some Hong Kong women became full-time housewives as they saw the futility of job hunting.

Immigrant women also encounter difficulties in regard to childcare and household work. Despite the fact that there is significant participation of married women in the labour market, women are still primarily responsible for housework and childcare. There is strong Cultural ideology and structural support reinforces the social construction of womanhood that defines a woman by her child-rearing and domestic abilities. The image of the “loving mother” and “ideal wife” is so powerful that women, regardless of ethnicity, race, and class, are unable to deconstruct that image.
The neoliberal restructuring, the hollowing out of the welfare state and the dismantling of social safety net have foisted healthcare and childcare onto the family and the unpaid work of women. Similar to other women, the Chinese immigrant women bear the bulk of the day-to-day housework and caring responsibilities, while their husbands are only marginally involved in such tasks (Weber 1994; Gelfand and McCallum 1994).

Many new immigrants came to Canada as nuclear family units. Without support of the extended family members such as grandparents, this has led to transformation of gender relations, the unequal household division of labour, and women’s relationship with their spouses. In China and in HK, women are able to procure assistance in childcare and housework from extended family members, or hired help. But they lost all that when they emigrated.

Here’s how some women reflected on how much their lives have been transformed:

There is a huge difference to me and it greatly changed my life. In China we both worked and both had a not too bad income. We shared our housework. Now although I feel reluctant to be a housewife, I have to do all the housework. He doesn’t get the time to help me, neither does he want to. He thinks it’s natural that I take over all the housework. I feel very depressed. That’s why I’m desperate for a job, not only because I can need money, but because I need to get back my self respect and confidence. [fgm:N5]

In China I didn’t have to worry about the housework. We went to our parent’s to have dinner every working day, and did some cleaning at our own home during the weekends. My parents helped take care of my children too. Now we changed a lot. We need to cooperate very well to finish all the housework and take care of our daughter. [fgm:N2]

Another Mainland woman, Min-ling, agreed:

[In Kwangzhou]My daughter lived with her grandma. My husband and I had our own place, but we go over to my mother’s place for dinner and to see our daughter every evening. After dinner, we would go back to our own place.

Similar, the women form HK, who were used to having a good support system at home, found it particularly difficult when they had to cope with housework and childcare alone. Here’s what Pauline, a Hong Kong women, said:

After I have immigrated, I realized that I had to do all the housework myself, and I didn’t know how to do it. I was so used to having a maid when I was in Hong Kong that I totally take it for granted that every day after work, dinner would be prepared, and that I didn’t have to worry about doing housework at all...

Life was hard. I didn’t have any relatives here. I didn’t know anything, even boiling water. And because my kid was small, I couldn’t go out to work or even just go out. Life was hard at that time. Later on, I learned to cook...
Some women, particularly those from China, found the lack of subsidized daycare for their children make it impossible for them to cope with the competing demands of paid work and childcare, and they opted for part-time work instead.

A Mainland woman who used to work in a restaurant expressed her difficulties:

...I got this job in a restaurant, the pay was minimum wage, and I work eleven to twelve hour days from noon till almost midnight. I didn’t mind the work, but I couldn’t get daycare for my son…they close at six o’clock, after that, there’s nothing.

Other Mainland women concurred:

If I can send my baby to a subsidized daycare, I can go out and find a full-time job. But I still have to make sure that I can get back in time to pick up my kid before 6 o’clock.

Some immigrant women from Mainland China, who have to negotiate several part-time jobs in order to make ends meet, and who have difficulty obtaining subsidized childcare, have resolved to sending their children back to China to be taken care of by their grandmothers or other family members.

This is what a Mainland woman in her early thirties who was a medical doctor in China, and whose husband was an engineer told me why she made her decision:

When we first came, I was pregnant with my daughter. My husband and I were both looking for work in our areas of work, but with no luck. We were unemployed. Then my husband’s friend took us to the factory where he worked, and we both got jobs in the factory. After my daughter was born, I couldn’t work because of I couldn’t get subsidized childcare. So we decided to send my daughter back to China to be taken care of by her grandma. My husband and I worked in that factory for two years, as menial labour. Now I work as a part-time research assistant, and my husband is still working in the factory. He’s applied to move to the U.S. though, and we’ll leave as soon as we get the papers....

Other Mainland woman also related their dilemma of coping with the contradictory demands of childcare and paid work, and decided to send their children back to China to be taken care of by grandmothers:

I want to work, but childcare constrains me from looking for a job. I plan to send my son back to China to his grandparents. When my situation is better, we’ll bring him back again. Having a young child also makes it difficult for us to find accommodation. Some landlords don’t want to rent to a couple with a young child.

My son was sent back to China already. I feel it’s very stressful doing the job search and taking care of my child at the same time, both mentally and physically. Sometimes this affected my attitude towards my son, and he would feel confused when I easily lose my
patience. After sending my son back to China, I have more time studying and working, so I think it’s a right decision to make. [fgm:N3]

The pursuit of better job opportunities as a result of the lack of recognition of immigrant’s previous experience and credentials also prompted this woman to resolve to transnational mothering:

*I have six years’ experience in accounting. I worked as an investment analyst during the first four years in a state owned company, and then a financial analyst in the China office of a foreign invested Fortune 500 company. I already got the CGA license when I was in China. The most recent year after I came here I had my first baby, so I didn’t start to look for a job. Two months ago, I sent my child back to China and began my job search. It took me one and a half month to get a job as a bookkeeper and receptionist. I hope to get back to my financial analyst job, but I know I need to start from a lower level. I plan to improve my English and get familiar with the local cultural environment first.* [fgm:N7].

While the occurrences of transnational mothering is prevalent among the mainland Chinese immigrants, among the HK Chinese, transnational familial arrangement popularly called “astronaut” families is prevalent. Astronaut families are families in which one spouse (typically the husband) returns to Hong Kong for paid employment, leaving the other spouse (typically the wife) and children in Canada. The astronaut flies back to Canada periodically to visit the family, and sometimes, the family would return to Hong Kong for a visit (see Man 1995a). However, their stories of isolation and loneliness were harrowing.

One astronaut wife told of how the lack of employment opportunities, social capital and social networks in Canada has prompted her spouse, who is an advertising executive, to return to Hong Kong:

...we were here for two years, and he has sent out lots of applications, but still he couldn’t find a job. His field is very competitive, you need connections to get an interview. But he doesn’t have any business contact here. He was getting really desperate...However, he still kept close touch with her colleagues in Hong Kong. One day, he got a phone call his former boss. He was offered a job with big salary. So off he went, back to Hong Kong.

Some women from Hong Kong who were discouraged by their underemployment and unemployment in Canada have resolved to return to Hong Kong to find work, along with their husbands, leaving their children alone in Canada.1 These children are coined “parachute children” as they are being dropped off in the new country. While outside of

1 Preliminary data analysis of the study “Transnational Citizenship and Social Cohesion: Recent Immigrants from Hong Kong to Canada” by Audrey Kobayashi, David Ley, Guida Man, Valerie Preston, and Myer Siemiatycki found that such occurrences are not uncommon among recent immigrants from Hong Kong.
the scope of my research, the long term effects of “parachute children” warrants serious investigation.

These transnational practices are prevalent among the HK immigrants. While the media has noted the astronaut phenomenon occurring in the Mainland Chinese community, they did not appear in my research studies.

For both HK and Mainland Chinese women, the deterioration of the material conditions of these immigrant families in the new country necessitated transnational practices as solutions to continue their productive and reproductive processes, i.e. maintaining employment and the raising of children in separate geographical spaces through transnational familial networks and linkages.

While transnationalism may have a strong tendency in reinscribing traditional cultural norms and values, these transnational mothering practices transcend cultural traditions and constitute a variation in the social organization and arrangement of mothering referred to by Pierrett Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (1997) as “transnational motherhood”- This term however denotes that only women are responsible for mothering. I adopt the term “transnational mothering” rather than “Transnational parenting” not to essentialize women’s natural ability for childcare and mothering, but rather to emphasize the structural inequalities as well as socialization processes in society which relegates women to take up the role of being primary caregivers and nurturers.

My study has demonstrated that transnational migration practices of Chinese immigrants in Canada is a gendered process, complicated by the contradictory demands of immigrant women’s paid work and household responsibilities in the context of globalization and economic restructuring, as well as institutionalized and organizational processes, cultural practices, and immigrant women’s own agencies.

The long term effect of the prolonged separation of children from their parents, and husbands from wife and children are not known, and certainly warrant investigation. Anecdotal evidence shows that some children who grew up separated from their parents were known to disown them. Although some astronaut wives reported a new found freedom, the prolonged separation of spouses from each other can also cause tension in couples’ relationships. Stories of husbands taking mistresses, and the loneliness of “widows” is well known.

More importantly, the large scale transnational migration practices has implications on gender and race relations, the reinscription of traditional values and gender roles, and the possible transformation of Chinese communities with predominantly single female-headed households or DINKS dual worker families with no kids certainly warrant further investigation.

**Conclusion**
Chinese immigrant women encounter tremendous difficulties in their settlement in Canada in the context of globalization and neoliberal restructuring. However, these
women are not merely passive victims of the social, economic, and political processes of Canadian society. Despite the inhospitable reception, my presentation demonstrates that Chinese immigrant women are active participants of Canadian society. They adopt transnational migration practices as a strategy to negotiate paid work and household work in a gendered and racialized environment. They are also vocal in their criticism of the Canadian social system and the exploitation they experienced. Some of them have joined grassroots advocacy organizations to fight for their rights, while others hedge their connections with professional associations to develop their career network for the future. It is hopeful that Chinese immigrant women’s experiences in the home and in the paid labour market in Canada will improve in the future.

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i See “Immigration by Class: Family, Business, Skilled Worker, Refugees and Others: Top Asian Countries. Available at www.asiapacificresearch.ca/stats/people/Pi2percent.cfm

ii Precarious employment refers to “those forms of work involving atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job security, low job tenure, low wages and high risks of ill health” (Vosko, 2003)