

# Migration and the Transformation of Work Processes: Voices of Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada

Guida Man

## Abstract

*Using feminist conceptual framework and methodology, this study examines the experience of thirty Chinese immigrant women in Canada. It demonstrates how their subjective experiences are articulated to the larger social, economic, and political relations in the form of institutional and organizational processes. In particular, it investigates how the differences in the social organization of paid work and household work in Canada vis-à-vis their home country have tremendous impact on them, transforming their everyday lives.*

## Précis

*Utilisant la méthodologie et le cadre conceptuel féministes, cette étude examine l'expérience de vie au Canada de trente immigrantes d'origine chinoise. On montre en quoi l'expérience subjective de ces immigrantes s'articule à un ensemble plus large de relations sociales, économiques, et politiques se manifestant sous la forme de processus institutionnels et organisationnels. Spécifiquement, on étudie comment les différences dans l'organisation sociale du travail salarié et du travail domestique au Canada, par rapport au pays d'origine de ces immigrantes, ont un impact majeurs sur elles en transformant radicalement la nature de leur vie quotidienne.*

Many social science studies on Asian migrants focus on investigating the socioeconomic adaptation of these immigrants. They generally derive their theoretical perspectives from four major models: (Yamanaka and McClelland

1994) assimilation model; dual-economy/labour market theory; ethnic enclave theory; and middleman minority hypothesis. These theories were formulated primarily for the analysis of male labour market experience. They eclipsed the importance of women's participation in the productive and reproductive processes, as paid workers in the labour force, and as unpaid workers in the household.

Since the 1980s, we have seen the emergence of studies on immigrant women in Canada (e.g., Ng and Ramirez 1981; Adilman 1984; Boyd 1990; Giles and Preston 1996, 1997), and on Chinese immigrant women in particular (e.g., Nipp 1983; CCNC 1992; Man 1996, 1997). These studies have discovered Chinese women in Canada to be productive workers, who were actively involved in political and community organizing.

This study investigates the experience of Chinese immigrant women from Hong Kong. It adopts a feminist conceptual framework and methodology which places women as "subjects" (Smith 1987) of the study, and which allows individual Chinese immigrant women as subjects to voice their situations from their own locations. This methodology has enabled me to explicate how the Chinese immigrant women's experiences are articulated to the larger social, economic and political relations, and how their stories are as much their subjective experiences as they are shaped by objective structures in the form of the social organization of society.

The data for this study has been generated through in depth interviews with thirty Chinese immigrant women from Hong Kong. Snowball sampling method was used to locate the interviewees. Each interview lasted between one and half hour and three hours. An interview schedule was used as a guide-

line. All questions were open-ended. Interviewees were encouraged to talk freely about their experiences in Canada and in Hong Kong. I have artificially delineated the work organization into two spheres: household work and paid work. In actuality, these two spheres are very much interrelated. They are delineated here for investigative purposes. Similarly, the lives of women who participate in these two spheres of work cannot be neatly separated into categories. Human experiences and interactions with others occur in dialectical, rather than in linear relations. Events and feelings diverge and converge. Inevitably, the women's experiences in these two areas overlap and filter into one another.

## Paid Work

The point system of the Canadian immigration policy, with its discriminatory measures in terms of race, gender, and class determine what kind of immigrants are allowed into Canada.<sup>1</sup> Within the Chinese immigrant household, the husband typically entered Canada as the principal applicant under the "independent class"<sup>2</sup> category, while the wife and children typically entered as dependents. Having been classified as "dependents" by the immigration policy, the Chinese immigrant wives were not supposedly destined for the labour market. When these women did seek employment, institutionalized practices in the form of the requirement of "Canadian experience" rendered their previous work experience in Hong Kong irrelevant. Consequently, some women found themselves dependent on their husbands economically for the first time in their lives. The immigrant men who were professionals were often subject to the same institutionalized discrimination when they looked for employment.

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For many Chinese immigrant women, the requirement for "Canadian experience" on the part of employers posed a barrier for them to obtain employment. In an earlier study on immigrant women, "three-quarters of the unemployed women in the sample found it difficult to find a job in accordance to their training because of the so-called "Canadian experience." Many job-seekers mentioned that the employers rarely gave them a chance to discuss non-Western experience" (Murthy 1979). This in effect creates a pool of workers who are forced to accept poor wages and conditions at jobs well below their qualifications so that they may acquire at least one Canadian reference.

Carol,<sup>3</sup> a woman in my study, became so exasperated with her job search that she gave up the idea of entering the labour force altogether. She lamented, "It's a catch-22. I cannot get a job because I don't have Canadian experience, and yet I don't see how I can possibly get Canadian experience without being hired in the first place!"

The requirement of "Canadian experience" is a discriminatory measure which prevents immigrants from entering certain occupations. The rationale behind it is that Canadian jobs are unique, and that immigrants are unable to do them competently even if they have had similar jobs in their home country. Hence, "lack of Canadian experience" is used as an excuse for employers to refuse hiring new immigrants. But in fact, the Chinese immigrant women I interviewed contended that the actual work they did in Canada was similar to their work in Hong Kong. As Evelyn confirmed, "To a large extent, the job was similar to the one I had in Hong Kong. But of course my experience in Hong Kong was quite different, and the system here is different also."

The lack of an accreditation system to calibrate the newcomers' qualifications also made it difficult for them to obtain employment commensurate with their qualifications. One woman, Ei-ling, who was a school teacher in Hong Kong but became unemployed when she came to Canada, lamented to me:

It's very depressing. I've been teaching in Hong Kong for fifteen years, and I have always been a good teacher, well-respected by my students. All of a sudden, I am told that I cannot teach in Canada because my teaching degree is not recognized here.

Another former teacher, Mary, concurred, "At my age [52], I am reluctant to invest so much money and energy to be retrained and recertified, and then still be unsure of whether I will get a teaching job or not..."

Generally, the Chinese immigrant women who were looking for employment exhausted all avenues, and took whatever work they could find in order to gain "Canadian experience" and to be absorbed into the labour market. Mrs. Li<sup>4</sup> story is typical of what I heard from most women:

Of course I had difficulty initially finding employment, that's why I had to settle for a part-time job. Moreover, the economy was really bad at that time. Later on, I learned how to find jobs and where to find a job, etc. I tried many different ways such as looking in the newspapers, visiting employment agencies, and trying to make contacts through friends. My part-time job was found through newspaper ads, and I got the present job with the help of a friend. I have applied for many jobs. A lot, too many. And I have had quite a few interviews. But I guess I didn't get those jobs because there was too much competition.

Those Chinese immigrant women who experienced underemployment found it difficult at first. But many had endured with patience and tenacity, for they were hoping to obtain better positions in the future. Here, Mrs. Li told me her experiences:

It was difficult for me at first because I had been working as a bank supervisor in Hong Kong, and all of a sudden, I was only a teller here. I had to learn to be supervised by other people and to learn to take their orders rather than vice versa. I stayed in that job for over two years. It is a lot better now with this position because I am now working more independently.

The experiences of the women in this study are similar to those in a survey conducted in 1989, which focused specifically on Chinese immigrant women's needs in Richmond, B.C. (S.U.C.C.E.S.S. 1991). The study found that whereas 70 percent of the women surveyed had worked prior to immigrating to Canada, less than 50 percent were employed when surveyed. Of those who were employed, there was a significant degree of frustration and loss of self-esteem. They were frustrated by underemployment, low salaries, and limited opportunities for advancement. Nearly one quarter of the respondents stated that their foreign education was not recognized in Canada.

An earlier study on immigrant women found that immigrant women from Asia, together with those from the United Kingdom, the United States, western Europe, and the Middle East tend to have higher than average educational attainments, compared both to native-born Canadians and to immigrants from other regions, such as southern Europe (Estable 1986, 22). However, the double negative of "immigrant and female" is less of a factor in the occupational achievement of those immigrant women who are members of traditionally preferred groups (e.g., Great Britain and the United States) than it is for groups which in the past have been labelled as undesirable (such as the Asians, the Eastern European origin groups at the turn of the century) (Boyd 1990).

### Household Work

In advanced industrialized societies such as Canada and Hong Kong, household work is privatized, i.e., it is considered the responsibility of individuals in the home, typically wives. The relegation of women to household work cuts across class and ethnic boundaries. Women constantly have to juggle the triple burden of housework, paid work, and childcare. From the standpoint of women, the home therefore presupposes a work process, which has to be continuously managed and organized. It is her labour which holds the family together. This work process is often ob-

scured from the perspective of men (Ng 1993).

Contrary to common stereotypical representation of "Chinese families" as large extended structures,<sup>5</sup> the prevalent form of Chinese families in Hong Kong resembles the nuclear family structure, namely, a small family unit consisting of husband, wife, and children. At the same time, in some Chinese families, (whether in Hong Kong, Canada, or elsewhere), as in other Canadian families, vestiges of a neo-extended family form still exist. In such cases, typically three generations (i.e., paternal grandparent(s), parents, and grandchildren) reside in the same residence. The latter arrangement is as much a response to the Confucian ideal stressing filial piety, as a pragmatic arrangement in response to the high cost of housing, and the shortage of provision by the state of subsidized homes for the aged. But categorizing families in terms of nuclear or extended is problematic (Eichler 1988; Fox and Luxton 1993), Chinese households appear in diverse forms and structures.

Regardless of which family structure the Chinese family adopts when they were in Hong Kong, the small geographical area of the colony enables relatives to live in close proximity to each other, thereby facilitating the development of a close-knit support network. One woman in my study, Suzanna, described her situation in Hong Kong as follows:

When we were in Hong Kong, my mother-in-law used to live with us. She did the cooking and the cleaning. She also picked up my oldest son after school so I didn't have to rush home right after work. My mother, on the other hand, lives close to my youngest son's school, so she used to pick him up after school and looked after him until I went to her place to pick him up after work. That's why my oldest son is very close to his *maj-maj* [paternal grandmother], and my youngest one is attached to his *paw-paw* [maternal grandmother]! You see, I had a lot of support in Hong Kong.

Her situation in Canada was quite different. Following her husband's de-

cision to emigrate to Canada, she came with her husband and two sons, leaving her aging mother and mother-in-law in Hong Kong. Without the help of family members, she now had to do all the housework and childcare herself. The loss of support system in the new country thrust the Chinese immigrant women into the reality of having to confront the same childcare problems as other Canadian women (i.e., the lack of affordable and quality childcare centres to accommodate working parents).

Despite the effort of femocrats, activists, and community advocacy groups, who put childcare in the forefront of the social agenda and pushed the Canadian government to acknowledge childcare as a public issue, little funding has been allocated in this area, particularly at this time of fiscal constraint. Rather than accepting childcare as a public issue, the rhetoric of the state is to reinforce "family values," and to push childcare responsibility onto family members (read women). To date in Canada, childcare remains privatized, i.e., it continues to be women's work in the private home, and this work is not valued. Government-subsidized daycare centres remain scarce, and privately run services are usually expensive and not well managed (Eichler 1997). Amy, a social worker, voiced her criticism of the inadequacy of daycare in Canada, "I have a 5-year-old and a 2-year-old. I'm finding that daycare is a serious problem. Daycare is not flexible enough to accommodate working parents."

Another woman, Carol, told me about her difficulties in Canada:

I am resigned to staying home to look after my daughters. I know this isn't what I set out to do. I had career ambitions, but I don't think there's any opportunity for me now. My teaching certificate is not recognized here. And anyway, with three daughters, and no household help, what can I do?

Within a household, the extra burden of domestic labour was almost always assumed by the woman as her sole responsibility. Women who tried to cope with their triple workload of house-

work, paid work and childcare often felt exhausted at the end of the day.

Although the gendered division of household labour is in some ways similar in patriarchal societies such as Hong Kong and Canada, the difference in the social organization of these societies transformed the situation of Chinese immigrant women, making their day-to-day living vastly different in Canada from that in Hong Kong. For the immigrant men, the home is where the tensions generated by their paid work are released, and where they find refuge from the racist environment. The wife is expected to not only provide physical comforts and a calm and tension-free home, she also has to give emotional support to her husband and to heal him of the injuries inflicted on him by his occupation. For the Chinese immigrant women in my study, the immigration process resulted in their loss of a support system in the household, and thus intensified their workload. Their husbands, however, did not feel responsible for doing household work.

The expectation that a wife will support her husband and children is very much structurally sustained and culturally reinforced. Failure to perform this function is frowned upon by others. Since many of the husbands had never done housework before, they therefore did not offer to help their wives after they immigrated to Canada, nor did these women seek their help. As one woman, May, explained to me, "I feel that if I can manage it myself, I won't ask. Furthermore, if my husband really wants to do it, he can offer to help. But he hasn't!"

Without any help from her husband or children, May had a very hectic schedule. Here, she described her typical day to me:

My day-to-day schedule changes depending on whether I work as a temp or I work at my husband's store. When I'm working as a temp, I usually get up at seven, prepare breakfast for my kids and my husband, then take the TTC to go to work ... When I'm working at my husband's store, I usually make a separate breakfast for my husband because he gets up later than the kids, and he

likes his breakfast freshly made ... I don't usually get home until six thirty or seven, make dinner, clean up, and if I'm lucky, I get to watch a bit of television before going to bed. But usually, I need to do the ironing, washing, and mending etc. I really don't have time to do much else. My husband and kids though, they watch a lot of television ...

But the husbands' inability to do household work was not the sole reason why they did not help the wives out. Cultural ideology and structural support reinforces the belief that husband's job should be accorded priority in the family. Even though the wife may have a paid job, her work is subordinated to her responsibilities for her family. Social and cultural expectations did not allow Marion, one of the women in my study, to seek household help from her husband. Her "problems" arose partly because of the constraint of the social prescription of what a wife (and in this case, a Chinese wife) should be—one who either supervises others to do the housework, or does the housework herself. Her "role perception" was shaped by external social pressure. It is conceivable that she could have attempted to ask her husband and children to help out, albeit with much resistance. But the socially constructed image of an ideal wife and mother is so powerful, and so much perpetuated by the media that women, regardless of ethnicity and class, are unable to deconstruct that image; nor are they able to extricate themselves from the guilt of not being a "loving mother" or a "virtuous wife." This ideology, which induces women to shoulder the sole burden of housework and childcare, is fundamental for the survival and perpetuation of patriarchy.

Structural forces also help to sustain the wife's subordinated position in the family. Although the majority of the Chinese immigrant women participated in the labour force when they were in Hong Kong, many became underemployed or unemployed after migration. These women's lack of power and status in the labour market has significant implications on their position in the family. For many women, management

and control of their family is the only real power they have. To relinquish their control of the household is synonymous with relinquishing power. It is no wonder that despite the fact that these women are burnt out from shouldering a double and triple burden of work, they are reluctant to give up their primary role in the family.

### Conclusion

In this study, I have investigated the experience of Chinese immigrant women in Canada. I have demonstrated how institutional and organizational processes inherent in Canadian society have tremendous impact on individual Chinese immigrant woman, transforming her everyday life. Consequently, after migration, due to the differences in the social organization of Canadian society vis-à-vis their home country, the work processes of the Chinese immigrant women in the paid work sphere as well as in the home has been transformed.

The point system in the immigration policy for the selection of skilled immigrants privileges male-oriented skills, while failing to value and therefore treat equitably women's work. Moreover, women's interrupted workforce participation due to child bearing and other family responsibilities is not recognized, and therefore not accounted for. The structural gender inequality which immigrants carry with them to the new country is exacerbated through the immigration process, and intensified in immigrant women's everyday lives in Canada, i.e., in their subordinate positions in the family, their ghettoization into low paying positions, and their underemployment and unemployment. Even though access to job training and employment counselling is crucial for all immigrant women who have difficulty in having their credentials and work experience recognized by Canadian employers (Boyd 1991), there are no programs designed explicitly to improve the employment opportunities of immigrant women. Programs often have restrictive eligibility criteria that reduce their usefulness to immigrant women. Employment counselling to help immigrant women identify job op-

portunities and compete successfully for Canadian jobs is also inadequate. The lack of a standardized accreditation system that offers a systematic calibration of immigrants' credentials has resulted in the underemployment and unemployment of these women. Boyd (1991) had previously argued convincingly that the success of retraining programs depends upon the availability of support services such as childcare that reduce the double burden on women. This study also confirms the double and triple burden undertaken by the Chinese immigrant women, thus leaving them with no time for other activities. Present and future government initiatives are urged to address these problems which confront immigrant women. ■

### Notes

1. For a critical analysis of the Canadian immigration policy and its impact on Chinese immigrant women, see Guida Man, "The Effect of Canadian Immigration Policies on the Entrance of Chinese Immigrant Women (1858 to 1986)," in *The Proceedings of Asia-Pacific Conference on Canadian Studies* (Tokyo: Meiji University, 1998).
2. Immigrants can enter Canada either under family class, Convention refugees or independent class.
3. Many Hong Kong Chinese people, especially those who belong to the baby-boomer generation, typically adopt an English name for social, educational, and occupational purposes while still retaining their Chinese names for legal purposes.
4. Some women I interviewed liked to be addressed more formally, as in this case. Others were more casual, and preferred to be called by their first names.
5. The popularized stereotypical image of Chinese families as largely patriarchal extended families with several generations living under the same roof has been refuted by Ping-ti Ho, "A Historian's View of the Chinese Family system," in *Man and Civilization: The family's Search for Survival; a Symposium*, edited by Seymour M. Farber, Piero Mustacchi, and Roger H. L. Wilson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965). Ho reported empirical evidence that the average size of the Chinese households has always been small, even prior to industrialization (i.e., less than six people, beginning in A.D. 755, to approximately five in the first half of the twentieth century). This is as much due to economic reasons as to the social customs of the time.



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# From Being Uprooted to Surviving:

## Resettlement of Vietnamese-Chinese "Boat People" in Montreal, 1980-1990

By Lawrence Lam

Toronto: York Lanes Press; ISBN 1-55014-296-8, 200 pages, indexed; \$18.95

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