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Negotiating Gender Ideologies and Identities: PRC Women as Transnational Migrants in Global-City Singapore

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Abstract

As a small, natural resource-scarce city-state aspiring to become a major player in a globalised world, Singapore's main economic strategy is premised on the development of a highly skilled human resource base as the 'key success factor' in confronting a global future. Besides investing heavily in information technology and human capital to meet global competition, the state has emphasised the strategy of developing Singapore into a 'brains service node' and 'an oasis of talent'. As such, Singapore's political leaders are rapidly reconfiguring its space as a 'space of flows', involving criss-crossing circulatory streams of people, as repositories of knowledge, skill or talent, moving in multiple directions.

As an illustration of the embodied and gendered nature of transnational flows, this paper focuses on the experiences of professional and skilled PRC Chinese women who have made their way to Singapore as a response to the opening up of China and Singapore's concomitant openness towards talented foreigners. We argue that contrary to their being 'trailing spouses' (in popular imagination) and 'dependants' (as usually designated in official statistics), women play many roles in transnational skilled migration and must be given full consideration as part of the 'transnational elite' in conceptual maps of migration. Some professional PRC women are 'lead' transmigrants in their own right, and for those who came as 'trailing spouses', many value gainful employment in Singapore, not simply because of economic necessity but also because such 'work' (even if it meant 'deskilling') is a definitive norm of womanhood. We further discuss these women's experiences in juggling 'home' and 'work' in Singapore in the face of gender-biased immigration policies as well as the more restrictive gender ideologies which undergird Singapore society. PRC Chinese women sometimes have to bear the brunt of being the 'sexualised other' in Singapore, an image which conflates gender, race and nationality.

The arguments are grounded in an analysis of 33 in-depth interviews conducted with PRC Chinese women in Singapore.

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I. Gendering transnational elites

Current theorisations of ‘transnational elites’ or ‘the transnational capitalist class’ tend to subsume men and women under ‘genderless’ (assumed ‘male’) categories (see Yeoh and Willis, 2005, for a discussion), failing to recognise that ‘skills are embodied in gendered human beings who move through gender-selective and gender-discriminatory labour markets, both in the countries of origin and in the countries of destination’ (Raghuram, 2000, p.432). This is symptomatic of the larger problem of equating globalisation processes primarily with formal-sector economic processes and giving insufficient weight to salience of other sites such as households and communities in the production of globalised spaces (Nagar, Lawson, McDowell and Hanson, 2002; Pratt and Yeoh, 2003). Further, in the context of Asia, given the longstanding construction of the west as ‘the source of skilled migratory flows’ and ‘in counterpoint, the non-west as the origin of unskilled migrants’, the non-western woman as a member of the ‘transnational elite’ is often thought in anomalous terms (Yeoh and Willis, 2005, p.212).

As part of the endeavour to ‘unthink globalisation’ (Beaverstock, 1996, p.424) and illustrate the embodied, gendered and raced character of transnational skilled migration, we focus on the negotiation of gender ideologies and identities among women from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) who have migrated to Singapore either as professionals or dependents of professional spouses, attracted by the city-state’s openness towards international talent. In moving across national boundaries in response to the opportunities offered by globalization, they also move in and out of the range of regulation by territorially and culturally specific

'regimes of power and knowledge' (Nonini, 2002). As women working and living in transnational space between different gender regimes, their migration accounts¹ offer us the opportunity to explore the way different bases for hybridized forms of identification between 'home' and 'host' are negotiated. We examine these negotiations in terms of the women's perspectives on their migration decisions, immigration policies of the host country, as well as their encounters and experiences within the spheres of work, childcare and public space in Singapore. This is first preceded by a brief account of the broader socio-political context that frames PRC professional migration from China to Singapore.

II. From China to Singapore

Prior to Deng Xiaoping's implementation of the 'open door policy' in 1978, the People's Republic of China had little interaction with the world beyond its shores, particularly during the Cultural Revolution from 1967 to 1976. Having inherited a technologically backward and economically poor country, Deng Xiaoping, as a leading figure advocating reform, designed his directives towards '*gaige kaifang*', in other words, 'reforms and opening up to the outside world' when he assumed leadership (Tang, 1996, p. 21). Apart from economic reforms, the open door policy encouraged personnel exchange, such as those sent by the Chinese government to study and be trained in western and Japanese institutions and firms. Even though there were no formal changes to exit controls, it has been suggested that by the turn of the decade restrictive controls were loosened to some extent in line with the open door policy (Liu and Norcliffe, 1996). By 1985, a law had been passed by the Chinese government to

¹ These migration accounts were derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 33 PRC women who hold employment passes (category Q1 and above), or dependent's passes. The interviewees were located through snowballing, keeping in mind the need to achieve a balance in terms of the major parameters such as gender (27 PRC men in the professional class were also interviewed but their accounts are not the focus of this paper), marital status (11 singles, 12 married without children and 10 married with children), migration status (a mix of lead migrants and accompanying spouses) and occupation (the sample included academics, research scientists, engineers, computer analysts, financial information analysts, and business managers). The interviews were conducted in the language the interviewee was most comfortable with, which was Mandarin in most instances (a few were conducted in English). Interviews were taped, transcribed, and where necessary, translated

grant citizens the right to leave the country, albeit with certain restrictions (Liu and Norcliffe, 1996, p. 313). This wave of migrants moving out of China since 1978 – and in substantial numbers from the mid-1990s – has been termed as ‘*xin yimin*’ or ‘new migrants’ (Nyíri, 2000). While individuals who leave the PRC were once regarded as ‘traitors’ within state narratives, such mobility is now encouraged for certain groups as a strategy to tap business potential inherent in the development of diasporic networks (Nyíri, 2004). Substantial numbers of Chinese skilled migrants have since gone to countries such as United States,² Canada,³ Australia, European countries⁴ and high growth countries in Asia such as Japan and Singapore.

As part of its strategies to compete for a place in the top league of global cities, Singapore has transformed itself into an attractive potential destination for many skilled migrants through a range of policies aimed at producing the ‘Talent Capital of the New Economy’. The push to attract ‘foreign talent’ hit a strong note in 1997 when the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, focused much of his National Day Rally speech ‘Global City, Best Home’ on the need to gather international talent to make Singapore a cosmopolitan city (Goh, 1997). This theme has been a major preoccupation among the governing elite and policy makers, recurring as recently as in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s 2006 National Day Rally speech during which the Prime Minister made clear that promoting the immigration of the skilled and

into English.

² PRC Chinese constitutes one of the major sources of skilled professionals going to the United States (see Ong et al., 1992; Skeldon, 1994a; Cheng and Yang, 1998; cf. Skeldon, 1997). The absolute annual number of Chinese immigrants increased from 14,421 in 1977 to 56,426 in 2001, while the number of skilled workers from China who entered the U.S. in 2002-2003 under the H-1B visa program was 17,000 (with almost half going into computer-related occupations (Skeldon, 1994b). Out of more than 320,000 students who went for overseas education from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, nearly half of them headed to the United States (Larmer, 2000, p. 12). In 2002-2003, there were 64,757 students from China enrolled in U.S. degree-granting institutions (Skeldon, 2004).

³ In the case of Canada, China has become the principal source of landed immigrants from 1998. Canada is a popular destination for student migrants (Skeldon, 1994b; 1996).

⁴ There has been substantial growth in recent years in the number of Chinese skilled workers (particularly health workers) and students entering northern Europe. In the UK, for example, the number of Chinese students enrolled in British institutions of higher learning increased by 71 per cent between 2000 and 2001 to reach

talented is a necessary strategy crucial to Singapore's long-term growth and prosperity.⁵ Many directives geared towards attracting and retaining foreign talent have already been put in place, ranging from permanent residency and personalised employment passes to the branding of the city as a creative and cosmopolitan 'Global City of the Arts'. In 2006, skilled workers and professionals accounted for about 90,000 (or 13.4 percent) of Singapore's total number of the nonresident population. Apart from Malaysians, the majority were from China and India, the two main nontraditional source countries targeted for skilled workers (Yeoh, 2007).⁶

In general, the movement of professional Chinese migrants is conditioned by 'job opportunities, work conditions and cultural milieu' (Cheng and Katz, 1998, p. 76). These new migrants – what Chan (1997, p. 206) calls 'the Chinese transilient, ... the new middle class, the transnational Chinese bourgeoisie' – tend to be young, aged between early twenties and early forties. A number of them come in pursuit of higher education and remain to work after they have graduated, while others come directly to take up employment positions in organisations and institutions. Singapore may or may not be their first destination since leaving China. Singapore may not be the final destination either. Neither is return to China a certainty. As the term 'transnational migrant' implies, they do not necessarily wish to return to China. Nevertheless, they neither cut themselves off completely from China nor exclude the possibility of returning. Instead, mobilities are 'neither unidirectional nor final' but characterised by '[m]ultiple, circular, and return migrations, rather than a single great journey from one sedentary space to another' (Lie, 1995, p. 304).

18,000. They are also the largest group out of a total of 143,000 foreign students in the UK (Laczko, 2003).

⁵ While Singaporeans have voiced fears that too heavy a reliance on 'foreign talent' will increase competition for jobs, space, and limited resources to the detriment of citizens, and that foreigners will not integrate well or be loyal to their adopted country, the governing elite has in response stressed the argument that 'foreign talent' are crucial to growing the economic pie for the benefit of all, including Singaporeans. Singaporeans are instead encouraged to change their mindset towards global talent and to welcome them as co-workers, residents and new

III. Migration Decisions: Is Gender out of the Equation?

It has been argued in the literature on split-household transnational family formation that ‘at their core, families assume transnational morphologies as a coherent strategy to pursue specific projects, to maximize benefits while minimizing risks, with the strategic intent to aspire to better futures’ (Yeoh, Huang and Lam, 2005: 312). The more commonly observed transnational division of labour among geographically-split households of professional and skilled migrants involves the male breadwinner working abroad (or commuting between places as a ‘frequent flyer’) while his wife and children remain ‘left behind’ in the home country.⁷ Another variant, also involving a male breadwinner, is the phenomenon of the “astronaut” husband, first used to describe Hong Kong businessmen and professionals who sought to relocate their families in “safe havens” such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in the run-up to the return of the British colony to China in 1997 while they returned to work or manage businesses in Hong Kong for months at a time (Skeldon, 1994a). In much of the literature on elite transnational households, men are the prime movers in migration while women play subordinate or supporting roles.

In our study of PRC skilled migrants in Singapore, however, women feature regularly alongside men as what may be called ‘lead migrants’ and ‘independent migrants’. Among the ‘lead migrants’ – that is, those who take the lead in coming to Singapore first to be followed later by their spouse (and children) – there were five married women without children and three married women with children. Among ‘independent migrants’, there were two married women with no children who migrated to Singapore, leaving behind their husbands in China) alongside 12 single women. PRC women who feature as ‘lead’ or ‘independent’ migrants are

citizens whenever possible (Goh, 2000, p. 39).

⁶ Other major groups of skilled expatriates in Singapore include the Japanese, Taiwanese and Hong Kongers.

⁷ As an example of work in this vein, see Yeoh and Willis (2004) which focuses on the interpretations and negotiations of “fatherhood” among Singaporean men who have ventured into China as economic migrants,

hence as visible in the sample as those (11 altogether) who came to Singapore as ‘accompanying wives’ of husbands who played lead roles in the migration process.

As with other studies of mobilities among single women (Willis and Yeoh, 2003), single PRC women operating as independent migrants appear to have much freedom to go overseas. Most referred to their parents’ unreserved support, if not encouragement to venture overseas, as well as Singapore’s ‘good name’ as a desirable place where their daughters can be put on track to a brighter future through foreign education and/or work in Singapore. A minority like Xiaoting and Huiru (both business management trainees in their twenties) said that while their parents had to overcome initial anxieties regarding the absence of their children in the context of China’s one-child policy, they did not have serious difficulties in obtaining parents’ support for their first trip overseas. What went against the grain somewhat of current migration research (Yeoh and Willis, 2005) is the degrees of freedom married women, with or without children, had with respect to independent migration. Most did not consider that being a ‘wife’ and/or ‘mother’ presented any major ‘problem’ for them to leave China independently and in fact said that their husbands had no objections to their leaving and instead supported them. For example, when Peiqun (originally a graduate student before becoming a research assistant; in her thirties) came to Singapore, she left her husband and six-year-old daughter in China, sending for them only after she found a job in Singapore. She did not face any objections from her husband as ‘[m]y husband ... is quite easy-going. He said that if I am willing, just go’. Although she found the arrangement emotionally difficult initially, she eventually overcame the pangs of separation, as did her daughter (‘[s]he is tough and so she didn’t really mind [my absence]’). Similarly, Shirley (a systems analyst in her thirties) had the support of her husband when she decided to move to Singapore and believed

leaving behind their wives and children in Singapore.

that she would get used to being apart:

I think he doesn't mind [our separation]. ... Because I want [to come to Singapore] then he supports [me]. ... I think you will get used to it [the separation].

As the household strategies approach (Chant and Radcliffe, 1992) points out, migration decisions are often tied to the needs of and politics within the family-household. In the current context when 'China is on the move' and many PRC Chinese are keen to venture overseas, allowing any member of the family-household – male or female - to migrate first is a significant household strategy which can pave the way for other family members to eventually leave China. Allowing women to play the role of independent and/or lead migrant constitutes an important strategy especially in cases where the opportunities to go overseas have yet to materialise for their husbands. Once the women settle into their jobs and establish their immigration status in Singapore, they can then make arrangements for their husbands and children to come. For Xiaoling (a research assistant in her thirties), for example, her desire to obtain a foreign degree brought her to Singapore where she embarked on a masters degree in engineering with her husband's full backing. After about a year, her husband deliberately looked for a job in Singapore and managed to find a position in a private company in the host city.

The male interviewees made similar points about coming out to Singapore first to pave the way for their wives and children. Hence, whether overseas opportunities are open to the husband or the wife, the strategy is to seize them first to allow one member of the household to step out. Families are brought over only when circumstances are suitable. If the situation falls short of expectations, the migrating partner – either the husband or wife – can return to China where the 'home base' continues to operate. Who plays the role of lead migrant is often dependent on the pragmatic question as to who has the better overseas offer. In Xuting's (a

purchasing manager in her thirties) case, both husband and wife have taken turns playing lead migrant. In Xuting's case, her husband went to Australia alone to study before she joined him over a year later. Xuting made sure her husband prepared the way before she joined him in Australia:

At that time, all the Chinese wanted to go abroad. It was also not possible for the two of us to go [to Australia] together. ... So I let my husband go and see how it is. I thought he should go out and build some foundation first before I go.

When in Australia, Xuting applied for and landed a job based in Singapore. She came to Singapore from Australia as an independent migrant and her husband joined her about two years later. It was only upon settling into Singapore and stabilising her career that Xuting suggested that her husband join her:

Later on, I feel that Singapore is not bad because there are many job openings. I asked him to come over. Because I was already here, Singapore gave him a longer visa, a six-month Social Visit Pass. That's why it was easy for him to find a job.

The transnational family formation emerging from these accounts is one which is highly mutable, opportunity-driven and much less tied to gendered positions within the family-household: essentially, whether male or female, the lead migrant seizes the opportunity to venture overseas and test the grounds before the follower migrant follows suit. While sequential migration within the family is certainly not new, what is distinctive about the migration patterns observed here is the prevalence of pragmatism over patriarchy in decision-making. Unlike other more conservative forms of Asian transnational families where men are the prime movers and which essentially preserves the gendered household division of labour despite being 'stretched' across a transnational stage, sequential overseas migration as practised by these PRC migrants is somewhat 'gender-blind', governed by who has better offers abroad and can pave the way for the 'follower'. This is exemplified in the words of Xuting as she speaks of her husband's willingness to be separated from her:

[PRC] Chinese couples are not like Singaporean couples where the 'wife would follow/obey what the husband says' [*fu chang fu sui*]. China was not like that. Even now, it is not like that. The husbands have the spirit of sacrifice. They know that they have to sacrifice today if they want a better tomorrow. Many of my friends are like that too.

There are hence few gender identity barriers to overseas migration for the PRC family-household; instead transnational migration and dispersal remains 'often a rational family decision to preserve the family, a resourceful and resilient way of strengthening it: families split in order to be together translocally' (Chan, 1997, p. 195).

IV. Singapore's Immigration Policies: Is Gender back in the Equation?

From the perspective of the interviewees, there is agreement that household decisions regarding out-migration are governed by pragmatic rather than gender considerations. However, this perspective shifts considerably when interviewees discussed their experiences *vis-à-vis* the point of immigration into the host country.

State immigration policies are often underwritten by gender ideologies which naturalises the implementation of certain policies as well as the failure to legislate others. As Yuval-Davis (1997, p. 24) has argued, '[w]omen have tended to be differentially regulated to men in nationality, immigration and refugee legislation, often being constructed as dependent on their family men and expected to follow them and live where they do'. For interviewees who arrived in Singapore before 1998, only men were allowed to sponsor their wives on dependant's passes. The gender-biased nature of Singapore's immigration policies came as a shock. Liyin (a research fellow in her thirties) came to work in Singapore, bringing her two daughters but leaving her husband in Sydney. After several applications, she finally managed to get a dependant's pass for her husband. Although she was successful in her application, she felt that it was given as a 'concession':

I feel strongly discriminated ... [as a] woman in Singapore. I don't have an equal chance to obtain a Dependent's Pass [for her husband] compared to my male colleagues. It is astonishing! ... In principle, I am not able to sponsor my husband on a Dependent's Pass. But in the end they actually gave it to me....

Gender neutrality in this respect only came into effect from 1 September 1998 when employment pass holders (P or Q1 categories) regardless of gender became eligible for Dependent's Passes for their spouses and unmarried children under 21. However, some interviewees who entered Singapore even after September 1998 period felt that the immigration regulations were still far from gender neutral. Xuting, for example, felt that the 'shadow' of gender discrimination continued to linger on when her application for a Dependent's Pass for her husband was rejected. She added that she finally understood why people had been telling her that Singapore was a 'traditional society' when her desire to let her daughter take on her family name was disallowed:

At the time when I got my Employment Pass, I wanted to apply for a Dependent's Pass for my husband. But it was rejected. ... Then my elder daughter was born. In China, ... a daughter can take on either parent's surname. ... I wanted her to take on my surname ... but it was not allowed ... unless the child is illegitimate. That's when I got to understand this point [about Singapore being a traditional society]. ... My husband told me, 'as a woman here, you have no status at all'.

Beyond the issuing of dependent's passes, interviewees also encountered what they perceived as gender-biased regulations in relation to the granting of permanent residency and Singapore citizenship. Until recently,⁸ only a male employment pass holder applying for permanent residency encounter differential treatment depending on their gender could include his wife and unmarried children below 21 years of age in his application. A female applicant could only include her unmarried children below 21 while her husband has to apply for permanent residency based on his own merits. Shirley who encountered this regulation complained:

There seems to be some gender discrimination. Man's wife can get permanent residency if he gets it. But not for woman, her husband cannot have [when she

⁸ According to a Ministry of Manpower officer that we spoke to in March 2007, gender neutrality was introduced 'about two years ago'.

gets it]. ... He has to apply himself. ... Society [is] still quite traditional.

This 'traditional' stance seems to also condition applications for Singapore citizenship as well. While nothing in the 'written rules' of citizenship application appears discriminatory against migrant women, some interviewees felt that actual experience pointed differently. Xuting, whose entire family had taken on board Singapore citizenship at the time of interview, felt that her experience in applying for Singapore citizenship was subject to 'unwritten' gender rules.⁹ Even though she was eligible to apply for citizenship before her husband was, she was advised to wait until he qualified. She was told that her chances would be greater and the processing would be faster:

The official told me that it is best that I apply for the citizenship together with my husband. It would be easier and faster. At that time, they encourage men to apply for citizenship. For ladies who apply independently without their husbands, it would be more troublesome. It will take a lot of time and it needs a minister to look through it. ... So I waited for another three months for my husband so that he can apply for us.

Migration as a boundary-crossing process is thus negotiated between different 'regimes of power and knowledge' is hence caught in the contradictions between gender-neutral, family-based migration decisions on the one hand and gender-biased immigration policies governing entry into host society on the other. PRC women refusing to be pigeonholed as 'dependant' in the migration process as well as families wishing to suspend gender considerations in order to use migration in strategic ways may still encounter a less-than-level playing field when negotiating entry into the host nation.

⁹ Part of the reason why interviewees continued to perceive the immigration regulations as gender-biased despite changes to remove discriminatory clauses relates to the lack of transparency in the application process for permanent residency or citizenship. In January 1999, a point system including six criteria – type of work pass, duration of stay in Singapore, academic qualification, basic monthly salary, age and family ties in Singapore – was introduced in order to render the application process for permanent residency more comprehensive. However, how each criterion is weighted vis-à-vis one another is revealed and no reason is ever offered for approval or rejection. This renders the system open to charges of a lack of transparency, which is a common refrain among interviewees.

V. Balancing Work and Family

Work and Deskilling

It has been argued that the ‘current generation of [PRC] Chinese women grew up believing that working outside the home is the only way of life. They regard working as the prime and only indicator of gender equality’ (Zhou, 2000, p. 449). Nine in ten urban women in China are engaged in paid work and for the remaining ten per cent who do not work, their low educational attainment stands out as the main reason (Bauer et al., 1992).¹⁰ For urban Chinese women to be unemployed and ‘homebound’ would thus not only contradict social norms, but would be tantamount to having low educational status (Zhou, 2000, p. 449).

For the lead and independent migrants among our interviewees, migration is clearly tied to career prospects and/or in pursuit of work opportunities and is hence entirely consistent with their notions of women’s status and identity as professionals. Among the 11 interviewees who first entered Singapore as ‘dependants’, an immigration category uncoupled from employment, negotiations over the issue of work is central to gender identities. The term ‘dependant’ or ‘trailing spouse’ evokes an image of the ‘expatriate wife’ – one who can choose against having gainful employment, and by virtue of being an ‘expatriate’, can enjoy the overseas stint while the husband is on an overseas posting. Contrary to this image, all 11 interviewees except two have found employment at the time of interview. Of the two remaining, one was studying English on a full-time basis while the other is a homemaker with a highly active social life, revolving around her neighbours and church activities.¹¹ All 11 belong to dual-career households before they came to Singapore and are highly qualified in

¹⁰ It is estimated that 75 to 80 per cent of all Chinese women work, making up 38.7 per cent of China’s total labour force (Moktan and Subramaniam, 1998).

¹¹ In this one exception, the interviewee came closest to resembling the typical image of an ‘expatriate wife’. Her husband is an academic in senior management at one of Singapore’s universities and she has no financial need for engaging in gainful employment. Nonetheless, the interviewee makes clear that given a choice she would

educational terms: two have masters degrees, seven hold basic degrees and two have certificates equivalent to polytechnic diplomas in Singapore. Most have their jobs back in China kept for them for roughly a year when they join their husbands in Singapore. Thus, should they fail to secure a job in Singapore, returning to their positions in China provides a safety net.

All the interviewees were clearly aware that a dependent's pass would not disqualify them from seeking employment.¹² Engaging in paid work is a major preoccupation as they adjust to life in Singapore, and in fact 'being educated and without work' is as good as losing much of their self-worth and status, particularly when they already perceive women's status in Singapore not to be comparable to that in China. Xiaojie (a research fellow in her thirties) explains a viewpoint shared by many interviewees:

When you talk about China, it is different from Singapore. From the perspective of women, Chinese women tend to have gainful employment. In fact, a woman's work and her status in society are of a higher standing than that in Singapore. ... there are too many housewives here. It is impossible for us to stay at home since we studied so much.

In addition to maintaining social status within and outside the home, employment is also important for a sense of financial independence and hence, gender equality, as Mdm Zhao (a Chinese teacher in her thirties) points out:

We [PRC women want to be independent when we come to Singapore. ... At least when you have the money you feel that you are supporting yourself. This is important for equality with the men.... In China, we emphasise gender equality. If both husband and wife have the same qualifications, the income will be about the same. In Singapore, men and women are paid differently. ... The family burden is equal for both [in China]. ... In Singapore it is more like the opposite. Men are responsible for the matters outside the home and women are responsible for matters within the home. ... I find it hard to accept [that] over here the husband gives you the money. You feel dependent on your husband.

have preferred to work but is constrained by needing to give priority to caring for her two school-going sons.

¹² Those holding a dependent's pass can apply for a Letter of Consent from the Ministry of Manpower in order to take on formal employment in Singapore.

The interviewees also suggest that being an unemployed wife leads only to boredom and frustration that could strain marital relationships, indicating that ‘women do not strictly belong to the home’. Liuting (a stock broker in her thirties) who came to Singapore with her husband from Holland where he had studied for his doctorate explains:

The best solution is to go to work. ... It is the same in Singapore [as in Holland]. When I go to work, I am very interested in what I do. ... The people [at work] are nice. I feel very happy being with them. ... If I do not see a single person the whole day, when he [my husband] comes home at night, he may find me a burden because I will vent all my frustrations on him.

While employment is obviously crucial to the interviewees, the jobs the women take on in Singapore may not be ideal. Several were only able to find out which did not do justice to their qualifications. Despite having a certificate in accounting equivalent to a polytechnic diploma, Mdm Zhao could not find an accounting-related job because her qualifications were not recognised in Singapore and instead took up work as a Chinese language teacher. Armed with a degree in the German language, Connie (a clerical officer in her forties) gave up her job in China as a translator, a place in a German university to further her studies and a job opening in Germany, in place of accompanying her husband in London and later Singapore. She has no avenue to use her language abilities in her current job but considers it worthwhile for the sake of her family:

Sometimes, ... I do think maybe I have given up too much in what I should do. [Then] I think, if I concentrate too much on my work, then I would have lost my family. That’s why it’s not too hard for me.

Likewise, Liuting gave up a university research position in China to join her husband abroad. With a master’s degree in history, her skills are not put to good use since she worked as a travel agent in Holland and later as a stockbroker in Singapore. Although she finds it a pity to quit her job in China, she gives priority to her role as a wife and hopefully a mother later:

Yes. It is really a waste [to quit my research job]. ... When [we as] a family was separated in two places, ... we both felt very depressed. Just before I went to

Holland, ... I got pregnant. ... I felt that due to various sources of stress, I had a miscarriage. That was not very good. Then I thought, is work or family more important? I had to make a choice. At that point, I chose to go to Holland although when I was in China the job I had was ... a very good job.

PRC women as transnational migrants hence negotiate gender ideologies around notions of work drawn from both 'home' and 'host' societies. Whether lead or follower migrants, paid work outside the home appears highly valued among urban Chinese women for the financial independence it confers and as an emblem of womanhood and status. In actively resisting what they saw as depressed status among Singaporean women among whom 'there are too many housewives', some have taken on 'deskilled' jobs as a means of compromise.

Childcare

In transplanting the ideology of paid employment as an indispensable part of womanhood from 'home' to 'host' context, PRC women encounter a number of barriers which compromise the portability of such ideologies. Apart from deskilling in the arena of work discussed above, childcare presents another major challenge for those with children. Many felt that while employment in China did not pose any conflict between working and family lives, choosing to work appears to be ridden with considerable difficulties not experienced in China.

In China, childcare facilities with operating hours tailored to the working hours of parents and within walking distance of the home or workplace are readily available. State enterprises and large collectives with women employees are required by the Chinese government to provide for childcare facilities coupled with breaks for breast-feeding (Adams and Winston, 1980; Bauer et al, 1992). Regulations stipulating maternity leave provisions and the way in which work is assigned to pregnant and breast-feeding female employees are in place to ensure that

women can manage both work and family (Croll, 1995). The system supports the inner workings of dual-income households with young children. As for older children, attending full day schools is the norm, thereby reducing the need for additional care during the day when parents are at work. In situations when children are not brought to childcare centres, the grandparents will usually extend their help to care for these children whose parents are working (Zhou, 2000). As such, women in China have little difficulty managing work and family.

Coming to Singapore takes the interviewees out of such a support system and into an urban environment with few bridging facilities between the public and the private spheres. Even though childcare facilities are available in Singapore, they are not always near to the place of residence and work, expensive, and inadequate especially in terms of the care for infants and young toddlers (Yeoh and Huang, 1995; *The Straits Times*, 26 September 2000). School-going children usually attend school only for half a day, requiring care when they are home during the other half. Women in Singapore are expected to juggle productive and reproductive roles with little help in terms of state provision of bridging facilities.

Given the failure of the Singapore state in bridging employment and family concerns, several interviewees find themselves depending on transnational family support networks. Drawing on a practice that affirms Pessar's (1999, p. 548) argument that 'household members often develop economic strategies that transcend national labour markets and pursue social reproduction strategies that may similarly stretch across national divides', some PRC migrant families in Singapore resort to transnational childcare arrangements. One variant of these arrangements is to import childcare assistance in the form of flying in their parents(-in-law) from China on a long-term social visit pass. Unfamiliar with the childcare facilities in

Singapore and unsure as to whether foreign domestic workers (commonly used in Singapore as surrogate care for children and the elderly) could be ‘trusted’, Weiqing (a researcher in her thirties), for example, who was pregnant at the time of the interview, intended to fly in her mother to care for the newborn. Another variant is to return home for childbirth and confinement and consider leaving their children with grandparents back in China. In the case of Liuting (pregnant at the time of interview), when her mother’s application for a visa was unsuccessful, she had to change plans and return to her mother’s home in China to have her baby, while leaving her husband in Singapore. Leaving the children in the care of grandparents back in China while the parents ventured overseas is also an option, usually until the situation overseas stabilises. Torn between her role as wife and mother, Xiaowan (a librarian in her thirties) decided to join her husband in Singapore, leaving her two-year-old daughter with her parents for eight months before bringing her over.

In cases where transnational childcare arrangements are unavailable, some interviewees have ‘localised’ their options, but not without considerable struggle. Mdm Gu (currently a part-time Chinese teacher in a language school but about to give up work altogether, in her thirties), for example, gave up her research job in economics in a premier Chinese institution and brought her daughter to join her husband in Singapore. She took up a job as a Chinese teacher in a language centre with short working hours so that she could care for her daughter. Recently, a newborn son was added to the family. Without the benefit of a state system of childcare support or access to a transnational care network, she felt her stress levels mounting, and this was further exacerbated by her husband’s frequent business trips away from home. In the end, she felt she had little choice but to resort to the ‘Singaporean solution’ of employing a foreign domestic worker and also give up work:

I really like writing those economic papers. ... My position and salary [in China] were very good. ... I felt a great sense of achievement. I feel that it is a great pity

[to give up that job]. But I had no choice. Ultimately, it is for the sake of the family. [I took the job as a teacher] because of the family. If I were to look for another job in an office, I would not have the time to take care of my daughter. ... The workload in China is lighter. In addition, your relatives and friends can help you. Over here, that would not have happened. You are all alone. ... When the second baby came along, I was very stressed because the two children ... need me. I will have to give up work altogether. The sacrifice is painful but I let it be painful. ... I do not feel safe to leaving my children with a maid. Now that we have children we have no choice but to employ a maid.

The inadequacies of state childcare provision in Singapore pose a major challenge to PRC women migrants used to a Chinese system where the productive and reproductive spheres are more structurally bridged. In this context, several have resorted to transnational childcare strategies to resist relegation to the home. In cases where both state and transnational family networks fail, however, the women have little choice but to redefine their gender identities, giving in to re-domestication and/or resorting to paid domestic services from other migrant women also present in the globalising city.

VI. The ‘Sexualised Other’ in the Public Imagination

As argued elsewhere, migrant women are often rendered ‘out of place’ in the material spaces of the global city (Yeoh, 2006). The presence of PRC women migrants in large numbers in Singapore, in particular, has inspired considerable anxieties within Singaporean society, usually centred on the construction of these women as the ‘sexualised other’. The ‘China girl’ is seen to be dangerous and predatory, not only because they are different (that is, ‘more beautiful’, ‘more alluring’) but also because they are ethnically and culturally proximate to the nation’s Chinese majority, thus positioning her as a potential rival to the Singapore Chinese woman.¹³

¹³ Espiritu (1999, p. 634) argued that Asian professional women in United States suffer more sexual harassment than their Western counterparts because they tend to be portrayed as politically passive, sexually exotic and submissive due to racialised ascriptions. Here, we observed that the politics at work are not just calibrated

Media portrayals often refer to the 'China girl' as '*xiao long nu*', literally meaning 'little dragon maiden' but carrying a derogatory meaning.¹⁴ Yinghui (a financial information analyst in her thirties) explained:

The term does not refer to the female descendants of the dragon [a symbol for China].... '*Xiao long nu*' is what Singaporeans would use to refer to Chinese females who came here to work as prostitutes. ... Later on, as long as a female is from China, she is referred to as '*xiao long nu*'... At one time, there was a Beijing lady who was married to a Singaporean and they had a legal battle. She was also referred to as *xiao long nu*.

Indeed, it has been suggested that 'China brides' have a bad reputation among Singaporeans since the media's coverage of the divorce battle between Madam Shi Fang (mentioned by Yinghui above) and her Singaporean husband from 1995 to 1998. 'China brides' have since been stigmatised as 'gold-diggers or schemers who use marriage as a stepping stone to obtain permanent residence or citizenship' (*The Sunday Times*, 31 August 2000).

A number of the interviewees related their frustrations at being framed as the 'sexualised other' out to prey on Singapore men:

When we speak, the first thing they [Singaporean men] ask is whether you are a '*Shanghai mei*' [a female from Shanghai]. You understand what it subtly meant right? Maybe they can have a 'business arrangement' with you. ... [They think] you are cheap. 'Do you want to earn some money from me or can I take advantage of you.' (Yinghui)

I stayed [in this place] for over four years. They [the people from the market] all know me. They still ask, 'you married a local here? You migrated here?' ... When you buy something, they always say, 'you Chinese are like this and like that. From this I can tell that you are from China'. Maybe they don't mean anything ... but when you hear it you feel quite uncomfortable. They still differentiate you. (Xiaojie)

I think Singaporeans have certain perceptions about [the] China girl. ... something I don't really feel fair about [is that] I know there are some

according to difference but also sameness as well.

¹⁴ As noted by Jiu Dan (female PRC author) in her novel (based on her experiences as a student in Singapore), Singaporeans label China-born women who are students by day and lounge hostesses by night as '*xiao long nu*'. Often, these China-born women are 'seen as homewreckers who compete with Singapore women for their husbands and boyfriends because they are interested in getting money and permanent residency here' (*The Sunday Times*, 10 June 2001; 17 June 2001).

wrongdoings [that] have been done in the past. There is some China girl maybe do something wrong ... People have this perception that, 'oh, you come from China'. ... They will think that you come here, your purpose, your aim [is] to marry a Singaporean guy and get a PR, stay here and be a housewife and don't work. I mean like '*tai tai*' [woman of leisure] (Xiaoting, a business management trainee in her twenties)

As Haijie (a source analyst in her thirties) puts it, the conflation of 'China girl' with 'prostitute' or 'promiscuous woman' is so strong that '[t]hey would not think you are a professional'.

Resisting the pervasive nature of sexualised othering has meant that interviewees have had to grapple with the sexual overtures of Singaporean men in some instances but also to confront (as in the case of Yanchun, a software engineer in her twenties) or become immune to (as in the case of Mdm Gu) them:

At first I cannot understand or I cannot accept it. ... I feel very sorry for myself. But in the end I can stand in front of the person and stare at him and see how he reacts. The start of the conversation [the Singaporean man] will say, 'all of you come from China right?'. I will always be quiet. Then he will say, 'why you come here, China so good? And then, ... 'which nightclub are you in?'. ... It is a routine question. I am used to it already. I simply stare back and after a while, they turn tail and get lost. (Yanchun)

People would ask, 'You come from China? You marry someone here?' Nine out of ten people say that. I feel very unhappy. ... Then there is this, 'Isn't Singapore good?' ... I find it revolting. ... No matter where I go, ... as long as I speak and they could tell we are Chinese Nationals, they would become like this. Everybody talks about this topic, including the times when I take a taxi. ... I have already gotten used to it and [become] numb. (Mdm Gu)

VII. Conclusion

By highlighting the transmigratory experience of PRC women moving from China to Singapore, this paper shows that individual life trajectories are shaped not only by one consistent set of gender ideologies but the gender (and sexual) dynamics of two or more overlapping 'regimes of power and knowledge' traversed by migrants in their journeys across space. Whether 'lead' migrants in their own right, or 'trailing spouses', many value gainful

employment in Singapore, not simply because of economic necessity but also because of the Chinese ideology of 'work' (even if it meant 'deskilled' work) is a definitive norm of womanhood. The transplantation of such an ideology into the context of Singapore has necessitated considerable reworking of 'new' ways to juggle 'home' and 'work', as well as coming to terms with (and resisting where possible) what are perceived to be gender-biased immigration policies as well as stereotypical images of PRC women as 'predatory, morally loose and materialistic'. Strategies to cope with the gender and sexual politics which shape migration trajectories are thus highly variegated, neither completely rooted in ideologies of the 'home' country, or entirely fashioned from new experiences in the 'host' country, but somewhere in between.

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