Why do Skilled Women and Men Emigrating from China to Canada Get Bad Jobs?*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Developed countries vie for highly educated immigrants to boost skills and population. Canada’s skilled-based immigration policy attracts about 230,000 immigrants yearly, more than 46% are professionals and technical workers. The point system is essentially based upon human capital theory. Underlying the point system is the idea that an import of highly skilled immigrants will contribute to economic growth and improve the welfare of the immigrants. Since 1998, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has contributed the largest number of skilled immigrants to Canada. Yet, despite being highly skilled, many of these Chinese immigrants suffer unemployment and end up working in low waged jobs. As we shall see, women fare the worst (Chard, Badets, and Howatson-Leo, 2000; Li, 2000, McDade, 1988). In this paper, we try to understand the mechanisms that channel recently immigrated professionals, who had high status jobs in their fields in China, into mainly mediocre jobs in Toronto,
Ontario, Canada. We consider two main approaches used to explain the jobs that new, skilled immigrants tend to acquire: human capital and institutionalist theories.

On the basis of human capital theory, the prediction would be that highly skilled immigrants should get good jobs. However, in practice, human capital theory falls short of its predictions. Nevertheless, Canadian employers ground their views in popularized human capital notions, asserting that despite their prior screening, new immigrants do not have the skills that are needed for the job. The presumption here is that, if women fare the worst, it must be due to their lack of skills for the jobs they aim for. What is more, human capital theorists’ solutions to these problems will be highly individualised: restrict or retrain immigrants.

In contrast, institutional theory conjectures that the suitable qualities for job holders are socially constructed. New immigrants, and especially women, fail to get jobs because they fit poorly into the institutional environment. Consequently, the institutionalist solutions do not target the individual, rather they point to the institutional system and call for restructuring institutions to ease access to skilled immigrants.

The choice of theoretical framework used has considerable implications for understanding the position of skilled immigrants, especially women, gaining full citizenship in Canada. In seeing how these theories help us understand our subjects, our paper argues that human capital arguments are logically unsound, do not fit the data, and suggest solutions that will not work. Institutional theory is more comprehensive. At the same time, fixing the problem demands considerable re-engineering of Canadian institutions.

In the following pages, we first discuss our frameworks. We turn to our study methods and the characteristics of our sample couples, studied with qualitative methods. In Part 3, we discuss the structure of professional jobs and their distribution by gender and positions in China. Part 4 views these couples’ experiences in Canada.

1.1. The terms

Human capital theory evolved to explain the differences between labour and capital as inputs to production. The concept became economists’ chief tools to study labour markets and earnings, as economists and policy makers sought to understand how nations could achieve economic growth and human welfare. One of the main tasks is learning why people get the jobs they do, our main concern here (Foray and Lundvall, 1996; Temple, 2001).

Human capital theory argues that employees’ qualifications, skills, and work experiences, as exchanged in the labour market, are their human capital (Becker, 1964). Employers match the human capital of an applicant to the job requirements. They pay higher wages for those with more skills. The framework assumes rationality. People freely choose education and occupations based on their ability. If their wages match their productivity, the market is in equilibrium. Some people, new immigrants and others, may in the short term earn less than they ought to based on
their skills, but in the long term, the theory predict that they will get the jobs they deserve.

However, few studies explain the mechanisms by which individuals’ personal attributes contribute to a company’s productivity. To begin with, now that most of the labour force has moved into knowledge jobs, measuring productivity is particularly challenging (Temple, 2001). There are wide variations of productivity within educational categories (Andolfatto, Ferrall, and Gomme, 2000). Some contend that those with higher education are best able to take advantage of technological development. Yet, many firms do not take full advantage of their workers’ human capital (Hall, 1988; Pfeffer, 1994). Other organizational resources come into play in a firm’s adopting technology. In addition, studies have also shown weak links between education and job advancement (Blossfeld and Mayer, 1988; Lin and Powers, 2004).

Human capital is not a tangible capital, and measuring performance is ridden with a host of problems (March and Sutton, 1994). To explain how bosses choose workers, economists have coined the concept of signalling theory. People with recognized education send signals; employers associate their education with previous hires for these jobs (Weiss, 1995). This useful concept suggests that employers base their hiring decisions on comparing familiar symbols. They do not evaluate the worker’s human capital to predict future productivity, thus reducing information costs (Bills, 1988). Foreign job seekers send unfamiliar signals. Risk aversive employers, uncertain about unfamiliar job seekers, may not recognize their human capital. This is one explanation for the bad jobs new immigrants get (McDade, 1988; Schoeni, 1998). It is possible that the gatekeeper’s assessment may be socially constructed, with no clear relation to the individual’s qualifications. Signalling theory suggests this elusive link between human capital and employers’ ability to evaluate skills.

Conversely, the second framework, institutional theory, explores the social structure of the labour force that receives workers, rather than the individual worker’s fit. This model views professions as highly institutionalized (Scott, 2001). We use the terms professional and semi-professional careers often in this chapter. We define professional as one who has an intensive academic preparation within a field that is protected through legislation or certification procedures. A professional career starts with education, apprenticeship, and certification, according to the rules specific to each profession. Successive jobs with increasing responsibilities and managerial content follow. A semi-professional does not possess the higher degree required for certification, but has lower level knowledge within the field and can work based on instructions (rules or advice) from professionals.

Professions in various countries view the stages in a professional career differently. In institutional theory, careers are socially constructed, by which is meant that career milestones are not universally valued because professions are embedded in social structures. The social structure consists of common and repeated patterns of behaviour, norms and expectations which come to appear necessary. These structures underlie the profession’s own governance structure and norms of conduct (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).
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Scott (2001) analyzes regulative, normative, and cognitive structures and activities of institutions that provide stability and meaning, and control behaviour. The government regulates the institutional environment through laws and statutes. Canada’s common law system largely leaves regulation to the professions. The government negotiates and confirms the professions’ requirements for certification, and codifies some regulations into law. Professional education adapts to these standards. The professions set and enforce standards and practice that become embedded as appropriate behaviour, to which firms have to conform (March and Olsen, 1989). Organizations widely share cognitive understandings and interpretations of behaviour that assume that these standards are the way things should be. These behavioural norms are subject to professional sanctions. Since such norms are mostly taken for granted and not questioned, the state’s ultimate legal power to coerce is rarely activated (Lerner and Menahem, 2003; Richmond, 1984).

Institutional theory does not deny the importance of talent or training in doing a job, but argues that human capital is culture specific. The cultural element beyond what it takes to do the job anchors human capital to specific contexts (Nee and Sanders, 2001). The institutional environment recognizes certain educational and career patterns as right. In this sense, human capital cannot have value outside its specific setting. The institutionalization of human capital in the professions poses two main barriers to new skilled immigrants. First, organizations assume professionals will graduate from certain familiar and approved schools. They will follow an expected career pattern to become certified and recognized in the professional community. These taken for granted assumptions of what constitutes a professional operate unconsciously as a set of internalized symbolic representations of the world. When new professionals apply for a position, if managers recognize their educational credentials and career paths, they will presume that the applicants can do the job. By conforming to professional norms, the applicants’ human capital can be said to be institutionalized. In sum, work takes place in a socially constructed environment governed by rules and standard operating procedures. The productive force is embedded in institutionalized structures. It is not produced independently by human capital itself.

People having career structures that do not follow familiar patterns will be penalized. Their degrees will not be taken at face value, and they will have trouble being accepted as legitimate contenders for professional jobs. Such exclusion strikes a number of groups. For example, managers that have been laid off violate the norm of continued career mobility. Their return to the labour force is difficult (Newman, 1988). Finally, in the case we are studying, it is clear that former professionals who immigrate, disrupt their career paths, and they are penalized. They left their country of origin, where they received their credentials and work experience for another. In their new country, academic institutions, occupational regulatory bodies and employers do not recognize their past careers, and are under no obligation to provide them with work opportunities at the level of their previous employment (Boyd, 1985; Richmond, 1984).

Furthermore, professional labour markets channel women and men into separate careers. This gendered employment system varies between countries (Boyd, 1990;
Hanson, Schaub, and Baker, 1996; Hughes, 2001; Kofman, 2000; Pedraza, 1991). As a result, immigrant women run up against two institutional barriers: a career path that lacks legitimacy, and an unrecognized match between gender and occupation.

If skilled immigrants do not get good jobs, is it because their English is below standard, they lack suitable training, or in other ways are not competent? Such familiar arguments suggest that immigrants should bear the onus for their underemployment, and that they should be given advice to arrive with their eyes open. They should try harder to learn the ropes, see how work is done, even remove an accent. In effect, according to such arguments, immigrants have no right to jobs at their previous employment level until they demonstrate they meet Canadian standards. For this, the market will judge them. If most skilled workers get jobs that do not make full use of their human capital because employers lack information to assess them, it should be only a matter of time until their qualifications are recognized.

In contrast, institutional writers expect that structures will block immigrants’ ability to use their talents, and newcomers may never ‘break in.’ We can think of these roadblocks as akin to women’s demand for equal pay for the same work as men. Whereas human capital analysts call for opening jobs to all those that meet the criteria, institutional theorists’ solutions call for equal pay for work of equal value. This entails the systematic evaluations of jobs and credentials, removing parochialism from professional credentials, and translation of job descriptions into a common language that cuts across gendered and institutionalized occupations. Similarly, for new immigrants to be treated equitably, we need to ask, what work does a professional do? How necessary is local experience to each particular profession? If we grant that new immigrants have the right to equal employment, we need new methods to evaluate non Canadian credentials and training.

Despite the weak links between human capital, labour market outcomes and productivity, governments still act as if human capital will spur economic development. They pursue policies to enhance the human capital of their countries. When problems regarding new immigrants’ adjustment arise, governments often respond with programs aimed at boosting human capital (Foray and Lundvall, 1996). For this reason, we use several variables drawn from human capital research to test the mobility of the skilled immigrant labour force in our study.

We focus on the assessment of their credentials, the structure of careers, the organization of professional labour markets, and gendered employment systems. We ask whether human capital theory can explain past careers in the immigrants’ country of origin? Can it explain their entry into the labour force in the new country? Does it provide for variation? Here, a key variation that arises is gender. Is the job search of men and women, and those in different professions divergent? It will become apparent that human capital categories have more trouble explaining these variations than does institutional theory.
2. METHODS

The 50 PRC couples that we studied immigrated to Canada from 1996 to 2001, the majority in 1999. The husband was the chief applicant in 46 cases. He had good education, some English language ability, and a profession that equipped him for admission to Canada. Finding a job in Canada prior to landing is not required. Their median year of birth is: males, 1963; females, 1965. They averaged 35 years of age at immigration. The vast majority has Bachelor of Science degrees or higher, two-thirds in engineering, medicine, accountancy and computer science. Married couples with dependent children, they had to get jobs quickly. Most try to find jobs in their qualified profession. One, but rarely both, also might delay the job search while studying English.

We located half of our contacts through the rosters of a large immigration agency in Toronto, Canada, soon after they landed. The agency, which offers ESL classes and workshops on the job search to hundreds of newcomers yearly, is well known in the Chinese community, and is held in high regard by their clients. Those we contacted generously agreed to share their experiences, and introduced us to eligible acquaintances (termed a snowball sample).

Our longitudinal research charts the progress of these couples in finding jobs over a two and a half to five year period. This period, while short, is enough to reveal how those professionals with diverse experiences and personal characteristics adapt to the Canadian labour market (Remennick, 2003). While we do not claim that our sample represents the range of Chinese immigrants to Toronto, like them, most recent emigrants from China are well educated and from urban centres (Liang, 2001; Statistics Canada, 1999). We wondered if the agency’s rosters were predisposed to those who cannot find professional jobs through friends, agents or otherwise on their own. But we found that even those we met through personal contact also signed up for workshops, to get a window onto Canada. Further, few in our sample, whether participants in the NGO or those we met through snowballing, know established locals who tell them about good jobs.

Salaff, as principal investigator, carried out most interviews in Mandarin Chinese, aided by PRC-Chinese research assistants, also recent immigrants. We use qualitative methods to gather data. We conducted focus groups, did participant observation in job search workshops, and social outings. Our topical interview guide gathered information about husbands’ and wives’ family and work histories and personal networks. We analyzed the data with N-Vivo, a qualitative research software program. Follow ups keep us current with their work and family experiences. We averaged 2.4 interviews with each respondent couple and have updated most information through mid 2003.

In the following pages, we draw on our 100 respondents’ own job histories for understanding how this cluster of people experienced institutionalized careers in China and Canada. Quotations from the cases are followed by a pseudonym, the gender, degree and major.
3. GETTING SKILLED IN CHINA

3.1. Background: Opening Internal Labor Markets

Until recently, China did not have an open market for education or labour. Strong state controls shaped students’ skills, their choice of majors, and length of schooling. Students took national tests for university. State sector firms, prized places in which workers expected to enjoy lifetime employment, operated like an internal labour market. Workers entered a particular firm at the start of their careers, remained there, and were rewarded for their experiences in the firm. This system gave the Chinese state and the work unit power over professional hiring (Bian, 1994; Walder, 1986).

This system was in force when most of our respondents got their first jobs, but it began to change in the 1980s, with great consequences for their careers. The labour market opened to outside investors in the form of Joint Venture Corporations, or shared investment by the state and foreign firms. Chinese private enterprises also greatly increased their employment share (Walder, 1989). The foreign sector exposes these workers to a performance based management system, which makes great demands on workers’ time and energy, but rewards their accomplishments. Employees are promoted locally, go abroad for training, return to school for further degrees, and may use English at work. Labour mobility has increased.

Aware of differences in the structuring of foreign and local occupations, our respondents eagerly try the new approach to market based work. Minbo, an engineer described the systematic way he was recruited to a quality control position:

It was a joint venture, but the American party held 95% of the shares, so it’s almost a solely-owned American company... It was more systematic than state firms [in hiring]... Further, the American company was very advanced. There were training courses. They had [the latest processing technology.] State-owned enterprises were too superficial, even though there were serious problems, nobody was punished. (M, BSc. Eng).

Although many state sector firms also participate in the global economy, they gave workers fewer opportunities to broaden their experiences.

3.2. Gender and employment: Government policy and its limits

China’s centralized system of training and allocating professionals to jobs provided fairly equal opportunities for educated women and men. It is well known that strong state legislation can help equalize labour force disadvantages for women and other marginalized workers (Ronsen and Sundstrom, 2002). The central place of the Chinese state in the careers of professionals to a certain extent, served as an egalitarian force. For most of its history, the PRC government directed employment policies to
draw on women’s labour power. During the Cultural Revolution, women were exhorted to work hard. After the Cultural Revolution ended, a time of scarce human resources, women and men who received higher education and experience got ahead. By 1983, high proportions of women enrolled in the key fields in demand: 27% of the engineering students were women, 37% of the science students were women (Chen, Yu, Lerner, 1997:164).

Nevertheless, state oversight cannot ensure that women and men received the same education and experiences, or human capital (Andors, 1983). Further, the social value placed on family roles in China channel men and women into divergent professions, especially after marriage (Stacey, 1983). Moreover, women still face stereotyping and discrimination (Loscocco and Wang, 1992). As a result, women and men weave their careers around what is expected of them in the Chinese setting, resulting in gendered careers.

3.3. Education and Gender

Our respondents earned high degrees and enjoyed on-the-job opportunities to upgrade their skills. Admitted into Canada based on their skill level, they concentrated in disciplines dominated by science and technology. The credentials and fields of our women and men overlapped. Nevertheless gendered educational profiles were visible. Men earned more degrees. All but one has at least a Bachelor degree; half have higher degrees, including four Ph.D.s. The sole man with a diploma was not without specialized training; his private sector firm provided him with courses. Men mainly studied technical subjects that qualified them for the industrial jobs in demand. Over half (28) enrolled in engineering, and many of the rest majored in chemistry, computer science, medicine, and physics. A minority (10) graduated with non scientific-technical degrees, in art and design, foreign languages or literature, law, or business.

Women comprised nearly all of those with diplomas and high school degrees; fewer have Ph.D.s and Masters. Although more (18 women) had non-science majors, the majority pursued science and technology majors. There were 10 female engineering majors, and many in medicine, accounting, and computer science.

While state policy opened science and technology as a field to women, their parents also actively intervened. In the majority of cases, women were likely to be persuaded that engineering and other technical fields were not suitable for them. This occurred even when, as in the case like Liuma, both parents were engineers. Liuma’s parents convinced her to become a doctor. Medicine, which was practised in the secure state sector, was defined as a female job.

I took courses in science at high school, and I didn’t feel like being an engineer, so I chose medicine, which was more suitable for women, and I liked this profession, so did my parents… They didn’t think [being an engineer] was suitable for girls. They suggested to me at that time: a teacher or a doctor. Because I didn’t have much patience, I wouldn’t make a good teacher. (How did you come to think of going abroad?) Liuma: I had that idea very
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early. And working in hospitals in China, people were promoted according to seniority. ...No matter how well you do, you won't get the priority. At that time, I didn't know too much about other countries, but I thought that there might be more opportunities and it would be more equal. Working in the hospitals in China was like lining up, the promotion, retirement, there wasn't motivation. I chose to be an anaesthesiologist because, to a large extent, it was easier to change to a nurse from an anaesthesiologist. If I wanted to go abroad, it wouldn't be too hard. So after my graduation, I chose it on purpose, with consideration of the possibility of going abroad. (F, BSc Medicine)

Liuma even chose her speciality based on her emigration plan. Further, she was concerned about her English abilities abroad and added that “an anaesthesiologist doesn't need to communicate a lot with patients who are already asleep!”

In the end more women than men majored in non-technical subjects such as education, humanities, law, business, nursing, and social sciences, and this was also due to parental guidance.

There was initially considerable educational equality between husbands and wives, many of whom first met in school or on their first job. However, after they married 30% men (women 6%) got further training. Women took on greater responsibility for family matters. By underwriting their husbands’ further education, wives’ human capital and their career attainment fell behind. Nevertheless, at the time they left China, nearly half of the husbands and wives had the same educational level (21 couples). Moreover, the degrees held by 20 couples differ by only one educational level; only 9 couples' degrees were two levels apart. In sum, women and men enjoyed substantial opportunity to get high levels of human capital in the educational system.

### 3.4. Job status and Gender

After graduating, both men and women were likely to get good jobs. We can order their jobs as high, medium, and low status. At the top are full fledged professionals, with a bachelors degree or higher, whose fields require professional certification. Here examples include: architectural designer, electrical engineer, and construction site manager. Middle status workers are semi-professionals with a bachelor degree or diploma in white collar jobs that do not require certification such as the following: computer programmer, delivery co-ordinator, sales person, and construction site supervisor. Skilled clerical workers with high school education held low status jobs. At the time of emigrating, nearly two-thirds held high status jobs, and less than ten percent had lower status jobs.

Relatively more men held high status jobs; mainly women held low status positions. On the other hand, there was considerable job equality within couples. In half the couples (26), husbands and wives held the same status jobs, 19 couples were one status level apart and only 5 differed by two levels. Few women held higher status jobs than their husbands; more wives held lower status jobs than their husbands.
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Gender differences in job status in our couples were more likely the result of different human capital, than discrimination. The positions of women with higher degrees were the same as men with the same education in the same profession. Since men were more likely than women to have technical education and higher degrees, they were more likely to be higher status professionals.

3.5. Gendered Managerial positions

However, Chinese organizations do tend to discriminate against women for management positions (Chen, et al., 1997; Korabik, 1994). Professionals with higher education in a technical field were most likely to be managers. Nevertheless, fewer women with these attainments were managers. In sum, human capital and having technical qualifications lead to positions of higher job status. However, institutional factors and discrimination accorded men more positional authority, separating women’s and men’s careers.

3.6. Three Key Professions

We looked in detail at the professions of engineering, computer science, and medicine, in which 59 of our sample worked, to assess the career achievements of women compared to men in our sample. Engineers held predominantly professional positions. Although there were fewer female engineers, they were as likely as men to be full professionals. All the female doctors practised in their professions. Half the computer scientists were women, and most were full professionals. However, more male professionals in these three fields became managers. In sum, while men and women in these high status fields had nearly the same career opportunities, women had a more difficult time gaining managerial authority.

3.7. Job Sector and Gender

Nearly all of those participating in our study were allocated stable, prestigious state sector jobs after graduation, a sign of their elite standing. Both advanced professionally, although men were more likely to become managers. The chief limitation was the low pay levels.

Not all stayed in the state sector. The move to the private sector was gendered: 29 men and only 17 women transferred to joint venture or private sector jobs. The kinds of fields men entered eased their transfer to the private sector. Joint ventures especially courted those with technical backgrounds, which more men had. However, men with other skills were also in demand. For instance, a man that majored in Spanish language became a salesman representing international companies.

Technically trained women were also recruited into the private sector, as computer specialists, secretaries, saleswomen, and accountants. However, medicine and other fields in which many women worked remained in the state sector. Socialization
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for family roles figured in women’s choices. Apart from their specialities, women with family duties preferred the predictable time demands and less travel of state sector jobs.

Ying Chun (F) entered Tianjin University in 1983 and majored in mechanical engineering, where she met Minbo, her husband to be. Upon graduation, they were assigned to the same factory and married. When Minbo entered a joint venture in an economic and technical development zone, she applied to teach college there, in order to have more time to take care of their child (F. BSc Mechanical Engineering).

Couples worked out a division of labour. Many wives stayed in the regulated state sector, while their husbands chose the risky private sector (Loscocco and Wang, 1992). As a result, men not only earned more, their experiences in Western organizations and links to specific foreign firms prompted them to emigrate, and gave them advantages that helped them adapt to the Canadian labour market.

4. MOVING CAREERS TO CANADA

These professionals and technically skilled employees had already completed their schooling, chosen their disciplines, and embarked on high status careers in China. While some have higher attainments than others, while men did better than women in some areas, in coming to Canada all aimed to build on earlier successes. The two theoretical frameworks have different explanations for why their hopes did not pan out.

Human capital theory predicts a close fit will eventually emerge between new immigrants’ abilities and new careers. Notably, those with higher occupations and status in China should attain similar status jobs in Canada. In contrast, institutional theorists predict that roles cannot be clearly ranked by their human capital equivalent. Canadian careers, professional labour markets, and gendered and racialized employment systems differ considerably from those in China. Careers in China will be disconnected from careers in Canada. This is especially the case for women.

4.1. The Evidence: Jobs in Canada

Those we met are aware that they have lost standing. Whereas in China, the majority were professionals, in Canada professionals no longer predominate. Only 16 retain the job status they enjoyed in China, one of whom is doing better than she had done there. The rest, 84 of the respondents, have dropped from high to medium or low status jobs.

Women have fallen further away from their original fields than men. More men than women hold professional and semi-professional positions in Canada. No females are professionals, and a minority are semi-professionals. Most women are either in low status, skilled or unskilled labour or clerical work (34% compared to 28% men), or out of the labour force entirely (36% compared to 12% men).
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The differences between women’s and men’s human capital they brought to Canada influences who wins and who loses the good jobs. More important, however, are Canadian institutional structures. We explore how the differing social structures in Canada and China account for who gets good jobs.

4.2. Education and Gender

Human capital arguments predict that higher education should provide people good jobs. But it does not. The fates of those with different credentials are varied and inconsistent. The Ph.D.s are most likely to attain higher status jobs; here, human capital arguments hold best. Seen as a research degree, the Ph.D. has the most international recognition. In China, the attainment of higher degrees was gendered. Holding four of the five Ph.D.s, men had more of these scarce resources than women. In Canada, several are able to get research jobs. All five respondents with Ph.D.s continued in their fields, three as professionals. However, two fell one level, and became semi-professionals. A dentist, the sole female Ph.D., became a dental assistant.

While the picture is mixed, those with Masters (29 people) do significantly worse than the rest. This is due to the social definition of managers. Two-fifths of the Masters degree holders had been higher level managers in China. The majority practised professions which are closed to outsiders in Canada. They are often offered applied technical positions, and need to regain practical skills they had learned as younger practitioners.

Finally, the 53 with Bachelors degrees do significantly better than those with Masters degrees. Those in applied technical fields can easily enter production and work at skilled technical jobs. Only a few are unemployed or in school trying to re-qualify. The same applies to those with a diploma or high-school certificate. In sum, as seen from their credentials, with the exception of those few with Ph.D.s, human capital does not determine professional status in our sample.

4.3. The Role of Joint Venture Experience

Canadian employers are more likely to recognize experience in foreign or joint venture firms than state sector firms in China. The foreign branch is a familiar frame of reference. Consequently, those that had worked in a joint venture, e.g. an engineer who worked in IBM, another in Caterpillar Tractor were most acceptable to Canadian counterparts. A few of our respondents got jobs through networking within the Canadian companies in which they had worked in China, testifying to the importance of local recognition of workers’ paths. 20 of the 28 that have gained professional or semi-professional status in Canada had this background.

Those working in foreign firms got more human capital (colloquial English and other knowledge). Recognition of joint venture experience is also consonant with institutional predictions. Women with joint venture and private firm experience also fare better in the Canadian labour market. However, because women were more
likely to have state sector jobs, and they are under-represented in the private sector compared with men, fewer have this advantage.

4.4. Job Status in Canada and Gender

While many of our respondents had become managers in China, in Canada, they are presumed to lack the cultural skills. This taken for granted concept blocks opportunities for new immigrants (Ely and Thomas, 2001). It rarely occurs to employers to hire skilled immigrants as managers, since today’s managers will most likely manage new immigrants like themselves.

I had begun job-hunting. I sent about 80 resumes and had about 10 agent interviews and 4 company interviews. The first one is Johnsons & Johnsons. Why I failed? They wanted a programmer, but my strong point is system administration, which is usually done by white people. To compete with the white people, I have no advantage. (Xianyi, M, BSc Comp-Sci.)

Denying management positions to new immigrants has important consequences for women. Management jobs are seen to suit local women with university degrees, but foreign trained women with the same degrees cannot access them. As a result, immigrant women are apt to be segmented into lower status white or blue collar workers, where they do not manage others (Chard et al., 2000; Shea, 1994).

(So you feel you will do the same work next year and the year after?) I think it won’t change for five years. I will still be a programmer. Language is a big problem. You can’t be a manager. (What’s the biggest problem?) Conversation. It’s second language for us, you cannot speak as fluently as they can or write as well as they could. So you do the work at the back. For instance, they wouldn’t let you do the presentation when there is a big client. You just do the coding in the back... It’s hard to enter their society. (Yangyi, F, BSc. Computer Science.)

4.5. Three key professions and Gender

The majority of our 100 respondents were in fields where professional bodies control the market. The structure of the profession prevents them from entering their fields. The professional labour market works like an occupation specific internal labour market (Boyd and Thomas, 2001; Osterman, 1984). Access is only possible at the entry level, but once inside, it is easy to change firms. Professional associations monopolize labour supply by controlling certification and licensing. Entry to some trades, such as tool and dye making, is also licensed. Holders of foreign credentials need to repeat schooling, pass Canadian examinations, and have a stint of supervised employment to qualify, whether in a residency (medical doctor) or apprenticeship (ar-

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unskilled factory workers, and other low status jobs. Without recertification, they cannot hold responsible positions in their line of work. For instance, uncertified architects and engineers may draft plans, but cannot sign them. With little support for retraining of foreign specialists, few have done so. Instead, those former professionals try to get an allied semi-professional/technical positions, grateful to use some of their original training. These positions are far below the full profession in status, earnings and authority.

Further, the professional and semi-professional/technical jobs are seen as suited to different genders in Canada. For instance, male (former) engineers may train for jobs in applied technical, but few Canadian women work in these fields. Turning to three examples, engineering, medicine, and computer science, we find both men and women have trouble having their past career paths acknowledged as professional labour in Canada. However, women face even greater barriers of gendered definitions of suitable jobs.

4.5.1. Engineering

Women and men (38) with engineering backgrounds dominate our sample. Spread from high to low job levels, the variations in their careers give insights into Canadian labour market institutions. Male engineers predominate when it comes to those who do well. Two men are in the process of recertifying as professional engineers and two have already done so. Eight people have attained full professional status in Canada, and seven of them are male ex-engineers. They have better resources than the rest. For instance, his Ph.D. degree enabled one former nuclear waste engineer to do research and project evaluation for the Canadian public agency that oversees nuclear energy. While he has not recertified as a professional engineer, he still hopes to requalify so that he can work on projects directly.

Male ex-engineers often drop one level from professional to semi-professionals/technicians. Several have become computer programmers or process engineers, who do not sign their designs. Although the skills they used before their promotions to management may be rusty, they learn on the job or requalify through college courses.

In contrast, no female trained engineer works in her profession, nor have any attained a high status position in another field. These female ex-engineers lack transferrable resources. None have Ph.D.s in engineering, none worked in internationally recognized joint ventures, and hence none can access the networks of these overseas firms.

Most crucial is the difference in gender stratification. Canadian women are less visible in engineering and allied technical applied fields. While the number of female students is increasing in Canadian engineering departments, they still do not hold parity with men, while the percentage of women among practising engineers in Canada was less than 5% (Zwyno, Gilbride, Hiscocks, Waalen, and Kennedy, 1999). Tool and die and other craft jobs are even more sharply gendered. Women who had been engineers cannot easily take up skilled technical positions that are not customarily filled by women in Canada. Only one woman has entered and one is training for a job in a skilled blue collar technical field. Most former female engineers work as unskilled factory workers, and other low status jobs.
4.5.2. Medical practitioners

Former doctors also must recertify, which normally entails redoing exams and residency. They had practised in the state sector in China, without multinational links to comparable institutions in Canada. Whereas they took their professional training in the Chinese language, requalification exams are in English. Liuma is the only one of the five formerly practising doctors/dentists in our sample who is requalifying in her profession.

Unable to resume their former profession, they are nevertheless often able to take up a job as a medical technician. These positions are defined as female. Two women use their skills in feminized jobs of medical research or medical technicians. Technical positions are far below the full professional fields in status, earnings and authority. An oculist who requalified as an EKG technician also does eye specialist work in her clinic, for which, of course, she is not paid.

4.5.3. Computer science

Computer science is a new and unprotected field, where the market prevails. Former computer scientists are not blocked by professional regulations from re-entering. Although they cannot find work at a managerial status, they often find jobs nearly as good as those left behind. Their problem is accessing information about a good job, whether by personal contacts, agents, or schools. Only one of the 13 that trained in information technology and allied field attained full professional position in Canada, but six are semi-professionals. Women are less likely to be excluded from this field. The downturn of the field after the year 2000 put all in a precarious position.

A programmer and system analyst in a managerial position had specialized in disaster recovery of information. Holding a Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science, he only acquired a low level problem shooting job on a hot-line.

Honestly, after signing the offer, I felt very sad—the position was a little low. They said you should get work experience in Canada as soon as possible, so I signed it anyway. It’s very near my home. The boss is satisfied with me, because some of the other employees don’t know much about IS400. The probation period is three months. (Xianyi, M, BSc, Comp-Sci.)

Employers will often ignore our respondents’ experiences, relegating them to entry level positions in their fields. Many suspect that employers know that they have the experience needed, but are hiring them cheaply (Basran and Zong, 1999). They have to prove themselves through their work, not their resumes, to move forward.

Even for people like me, this company hired me as entry level programmer! (because my experience is not Canadian). Then if you do well, they raise your salary. (Yangyi, F, BSc, Comp-Sci.)
Janet Salaff and Arent Greve

In contrast, when a computer scientist’s former colleague attested to her abilities, she secured a job in a senior analyst position.

The company I’m in now, Sprint, was introduced by a colleague that I got to know when I was doing a project in that Singapore company [I worked for in Shanghai]. His team was recruiting people then, and his manager told them that they could recommend their friends because it was more reliable. And I got it. I think that one of the main reasons is that my boss, who’s from Hong Kong, understands the situation in China. If you talk with the native bosses here, and you tell them what you have done, sometimes they don’t understand. We are referring to different things with the same words. (Lei Hong, F, BSc, Comp-Sci.)

4.5.4. Gendered professionals

Women do worse than men when it comes to professional positions, in part because they arrive with fewer transferable resources. Only one has a Ph.D., which wins better jobs in Canada. Few have worked in joint ventures, with which Canadian firms are more familiar. Because professions limit entry, the credentials of only a few women (and men) boost them to professional jobs. The best that women can often do is to become technicians, which are highly gendered jobs. Excluded by the engineering profession, women who were formerly engineers rarely become blue collar technicians. Former doctors more easily enter the feminized sector of medical technicians and do better. In these two professions institutional factors override market mechanisms in hiring for higher status jobs. In sharp relief, both women and men get good positions in information sciences, which is a less institutionalized field and outside Canadian professional control.

As a result of men’s greater opportunities, couples’ equality has decreased. In Canada fewer husbands and wives hold the same job status. Only 13 couples have jobs at the same status level; in 12 couples they are one level apart; within 13 couples spouses are separated by 2 or more job levels. By moving to Canada, Chinese women have lost equality of status with their husbands.

5. CONCLUSION

International migrants have left one institutional setting which had shaped their human capital for another. It is difficult for those that grew up in one society to move their skill set effortlessly to another country. Arriving in Canada, the specialists we study face social and institutional barriers in regaining the careers they had held. The poor match between the social structures that surround jobs in a migrant’s home country and their new destination makes it hard to continue careers abroad. They lack recognition of their education, professional status, and their work experiences, and encounter a gendered labour market that does not match that of China. Chinese
women and men fared differently and their occupational positions depended on the
degree of control by Canadian professions.

We compared human capital and institutional theories to explain these findings. Both underscores the specific skills that professional and technical jobs require, but contest the link between educational and occupational structures. Human capital theory describes how opportunities follow credentials in those occupations where skills can be evaluated. Theorists ask whether the skills of new immigrants fit those demanded in the host country. Institutional theory argues that careers are rooted in structured labour markets. Labour markets based on human capital can be analyzed as a social construction that features perceptions of recognizable credentials and career paths.

The diverse fates of these women and men in China and Canada underscore how career achievements rest on a set of institutional understandings. Human capital better explains women’s past career achievements in China, because their careers take place within a familiar institutional setting. In contrast, women did worse than men in Canada only partly due to their lag in suitable human capital. More problematic is the role of institutional fields. Women’s education and credentials in the labour market are valued differently from those of men. Women are squeezed into fewer available jobs due to the gendered job profile in Canada which differs from the Chinese pattern. Their gendered experiences underscore the contentions of institutional theory. The highly institutionalized professional system in the receiving country affects women more than men. They are not judged by their human capital.

Our comparison faults the logical structure of human capital theory. When applying human capital theory, hypotheses testing on occupational achievements is usually done within one setting, where careers are institutionalized, and signalling theory explain these results. Comparing job achievements of people from different institutional settings removes institutional homogeneity from an empirical sample. Once one leaves the taken for granted setting, human capital constructs explain poorly why new job contenders are shunted away from fields in which their credentials are entrenched. Since labour markets are highly institutionalized, we question the validity of human capital theory in explaining market driven careers. Human capital cannot explain the lack of recognition and consequent drop in status of immigrants with Chinese human capital in Canada.

Institutional theory takes us further in spelling out how labour markets and choice of education and careers follow institutionalized patterns. The institutional perspective expects that those that grew up in one society cannot move their skill set effortlessly to another because their foreign education and experience is not taken for granted. Since the professions are closed to those whose past career paths and achievements do not conform to legitimate and recognizable patterns, immigrants will do poorly.

In conclusion, institutional theories are best able to outline the structural barriers to immigrants’ employment in established occupations. The institutional environment is a sophisticated system for protecting the established professions and their local population from outside competition, and is a discriminator against immigrants. It is necessary to initiate major institutional changes to take advantage of
the skills and motivations of new immigrants to Canada. The state should follow up by assessing immigrants’ qualifications in a structured manner, analyzing who is immigrating and how to standardize recognition of their credentials to ease absorption of those who were schooled and trained elsewhere. Other nations adopt new strategies. The European Union spends considerable effort assessing how professionals may practice in member states (see position paper by Malta Financial Services Authority, 2003). Israel has a Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, and Russian educated engineers need just to register their diplomas to be eligible to work within their professions (Remennick, 2001, 2003).

The state provides certain minimal civil, political, and legal rights to new immigrants, treating them like long standing citizens. The economic dimensions of citizenship are left erratically to individuals and firms. There are few easy answers, but we need to question the strategy of letting valuable immigrants with professional training flounder.

6. REFERENCES


Chinese immigrants' jobs in Canada


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