FAMILY ROLES AS SOCIAL CAPITAL: CHINESE WOMEN ABROAD

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Abstract

This paper compares the social capital Chinese women receive to perform their family and reproductive roles in China and Canada. Many have found that although most immigrants have trouble taking up their occupations abroad, women’s careers suffer more than those of their husbands, the reasons including women’s family roles and their dependence on social capital to perform these roles. It is common to view social capital as helping people in their work. Here, we view reproductive roles as a form of work, and as enabling women to work, or as substituting for paid employment. We study 50 PRC couples, aged in their 30s and 40s, with young children, who immigrated to Canada after 1996 in the skilled worker class. We compare how they built social capital for their reproductive roles prior to and following immigration to Canada. In the PRC, child care is provided by a dense web of formal institutional and informal arrangements, with the family playing an important role. After immigrating, most need to rebuild their careers at the same time as they need to develop social capital to help them in their family and child care work.
INTRODUCTION: WORK AND FAMILY NETWORKS

Work is not the focus of my life, taking care of the baby and the family is the focus, instead. And it’s very demanding… Now, I have to do it on my own. It’s so hard. Jun, wife of astronaut.

If you ask me what’s the most difficult part being here, it’s that we’ve brought our child. Because of this child, we wasted half a year. I feel if I had gone to that school earlier, I could have found a job very soon. I think in your research, [you should point out that] this is the main difficulty. We wasted the time because of the child. Xu Fang, soon after, she returned her son to China so that she could get a degree.

We’re totally exhausted. The only thing we want after work is to lie down and sleep. Dong Jian, the couple runs a Chinese fast-food counter.

With the globalization of production and services, professionals from Asia increasingly migrate to enrich their families. Migration is seen to improve work opportunities, family economies, and children’s future education opportunities (Castells, 1989; Sassen, 1991). At the same time, such distant moves disrupt professional employment and family support networks (Levitt & Schiller, 2003; Portes & Borocz, 1989; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). This paper analyzes how migration alters the family support system, especially affecting women. We look at how couples adapt to reduced social network for childcare and mobilize network help anew, and how this impedes the career opportunities of skilled women in particular.

A number of writers have studied how Chinese rely on their social networks for a range of help (Bian & Ang, 1997; Chi, & Chou, 2001b; Raschka, Wei, & Lee, 2002). Studies of Chinese networks have described their importance in migration (Hassoun, 1989; Pang,
However, migrant women’s social networks need more attention, because the availability of support affects their family and work roles. We especially need to learn more about the social networks of female skilled workers, a recent category of international migrants (Kofman, 2000).

Canada’s immigration policies grant permanent status to “independent” immigrants. Typical PRC immigrants to Canada are married professionals, who apply to immigrate based on their skills without having been offered jobs, or who have been preceded by other family members. In China, they have built collegial social networks during their education and careers (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981; Ruan, Freeman, Dai, Pan, Zhang, 1997). After immigration to Canada, to get appropriate positions, they continue this pattern. They search for local work-related network partners who are rooted in their occupations, rather than in kinship or ethnic enclaves (Salaff, Greve, Wong, & Xu, 2003a,b). In this they resemble other skilled migrants (Gold, 2001; Poros, 2001).

Parents meet many of their needs with the support of their social networks, but these are of a different sort. Professionals are likely to marry other professionals, and both want to develop their careers. To do so, parents with young children draw on complex support systems which, unlike job networks, are based on kinship. Chinese women work hard to exchange reciprocal care with their social networks near home (Chen, 1996; Chou & Chi, 2001; Yang, 1996). But can they do this across the seas? We know that unskilled migrants, for whom migration is an economic necessity for the whole household, mobilize family-related social networks over great physical distances (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; House, 1999; McArdle, 1999). How about those from skilled backgrounds?

Rebuilding work-related and childcare social networks after migration is difficult, partly because these two reconstructions occur at the same time. Furthermore, these multiple social networks are based on different types of relationships intended for different pur-
poses, entailing even more work to revamp them (Man, 1995, 1997; Preston & Man, 1999). These problems affect women and men differently and hit the careers of professional immigrant women the hardest (Willis & Yeow, 2000a).

To learn more about how women remobilize their social networks, we draw on work and family biographies of 50 PRC couples, who were among the earliest waves of PRC immigrants to Canada after restrictions were eased for skilled workers in the early’90s. In this paper, we first discuss relevant concepts of social network and life course. We then introduce some background materials on family support systems in China and North America. Part II discusses our sampling and qualitative research procedures. Case studies in Part III describe parents’ strategies in mixing formal structures and informal relations in China and Canada to get help with young children.

**Social Networks: Migration and Social Support**

It is widely recognized that families, and especially women, depend on social networks when they migrate (Boyd; 1989). However, it is also the case that many migrants arrive without having social networks on which to depend. Some are pioneers, who spearhead new flows. This was the case for Chinese immigrants to North America, some of whom arrived in the wake of June 4, 1989, when a window for settlement opened suddenly. The newest wave of skilled migrants from China also often arrive fairly independently.

Social class distinctions exist; while kinship ties are important extra-market resources for working class immigrants, highly educated people are more likely to seek collegial and organizational ties for equivalent positions in the host country (Findlay & Li, 1998; Gold, 2001; Hardill & MacDonald, 1998, 2000; Iredale, 2001; Li, Findlay, Jowett,& Skeldon, 1996; Meyer, 2001; Meyer & Brown, 1999; Poros, 2001; Salaff, Fong, & Wong, 1999; Wong & Salaff, 1998). We know that kin related social networks are portable across the seas and are central in Chinese migration patterns over generations (Zhang, 2001). Most of
these studies have covered working class migrants. Skilled, or professional migrants participate in very different network structures from those of working class migrants. The networks of skilled migrants are mainly centered on their professions and careers, and we question whether they can mobilize kin to the same extent as working class migrants.

Couples may have social networks, but these may not suit women’s needs because they function differently according to gender. For instance, women’s social networks join work and family spheres but may not get them good jobs. Men’s social networks more effectively join work and community spheres (Beggs & Hurlbert, 1997; Hagan, 1998; Johnson, Bienenstock, Farrell, & Glanville, 2000; Stoloff, Glanville, & Bienenstock, 1999; Wellman, 1992).

Most social networks that offer tangible childcare services depend on location and proximity, and we expect that these are difficult to mobilize across continents. When people migrate, do they not leave this kind of social relations behind? On the other hand, it may be that institutionalized network ties, like kinship relations, for example, that are fixed at birth, are not easily left behind. Such ties contain a set of expectations and obligations and they are the basis of help in caring for children. Precisely because they are committed, people may make extraordinary efforts to maintain their kinship ties.

**More on the Concept of Social Capital**

Social networks can supply or fail to deliver help - we reserve the term social capital for the successful provision of scarce resources through membership in networks or broader social structures (Portes, 1995:257). Social capital is embedded in specific social contexts, and the structure of their social networks and types of relations within the networks shape the kind of help people get (Aldrich, Elam, & Reese, 1997; Granovetter, 1985; Wellman, 1999). Depending on the resources that the network contacts can offer, they can provide different types of support, but one contact can rarely cover a broad spectrum of services.
Support may be located in diverse parts of a person’s network. Furthermore, different forms of social networks give diverse kinds of assistance over time (Poros, 2001; Portes, 1997). Therefore, people need a variety of contacts to get the kind of support they need.

Childcare is one of many services that people can get through their social networks. However, this delicate type of service involves considerable trust, and only a few members of a social network can offer the different types of assistance that childcare encompasses. This can be seen when we discuss types of relations and social networks that offer these resources.

Our most trustworthy relations are “multiplex relations,” which involve more than one type of tie between people. People interact in several contexts, each surrounded by others who reinforce the relationship. By bridging more than one type of relation in a dyad, multiplex ties connect several different networks, which open access to a wider number of trusted people. Strong multiplex ties generate trust, and are fundamental in mobilizing informal social support. We more readily trust the friend of a friend than we do an unconnected stranger. Indeed, if they have analogous shape, a friend’s network relations may be seen as equivalent to our own, and thus broaden the spectrum of help that a social network can offer (Ibarra, 1992; Krackhardt, 1992).

**Life Course Structure**

In each society, family and career trajectories unfold according to an expected timing, and figure in the immigrant family’s dilemma. A career is one’s work-life history, with long-term progression structured by the institutional and normative arrangement of roles (Scott & Burchell, 1994). The profession sets the expected timing of employment and career development (Pfeffer, 1997). There are also expected family sequences based on parents’ and children’s biological maturation, which are articulated with marriage, school, and other institutions (Clausen, 1986).
Since the biggest demands from work and family come at the same time, a crucial problem for dual-career couples is balancing their work and family careers. State-legislated family policies to support social reproduction often fail to provide effective support to dual-career families. Few countries effectively organize public childcare and employment to support dual-career families. Those that do may favor some sections of the work force with childcare more than others (Buchmann & Charles, 1995; Moen & Firebaugh, 1994).

It is typically women who mesh these dual work-family demands. Women may adopt sequential work and family courses, focusing more on each role at different times. They might first study, then raise children, then return to the labor force. This staggered approach often runs against the demands of expected professional career sequences. Simultaneous roles allow attention to both family and career courses. Here, role conflict takes a toll on women’s ability to do both without substantial help (Han & Moen, 1999, 2001; Marshall, Heinz, Kruger, & Verma, 2001; Moen & Yu, 1999). Men commonly adjust their family life to their careers, while wives employ long term, reciprocal support strategies to bridge formal and informal structures and attain work and family goals.

PRC immigrants may have trouble transferring to a new social context, as they must rebuild their work and family lives. Social structures, typical ways of building careers, and state family policies designed to support social reproduction differ from one setting to another, and entail considerable readjustments. Women take on most of this integrating work. Without flexible informal social networks parents have trouble bridging formal structures. Some go to great lengths to get help, and their families often respond. Others cannot.
METHODS

To understand how they reconnect social networks for employment and family roles, we studied 50 dual-career couples from China over time. We contacted approximately half of our sample through a large NGO immigration agency in Toronto. The other half were “snowball” contacts, mainly introduced by the original sample. While our small sample cannot represent the many Chinese immigrants to Toronto, our respondents are typical of emigrants from China’s urban centers (Liang, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2001). With dependents to support, all need to earn money immediately. We excluded those that originally came on student visas and investment immigrants, who do not immediately enter the labor force.

Respondents averaged 35 years of age at immigration, most with BA degrees or higher. Two-thirds had careers in engineering, medicine, accountancy and computer science. Men were somewhat better educated. Eleven women but 24 men had post graduate degrees. Men were concentrated in engineering and computer fields. Women were also well trained, and in China had careers in accounting; computers, engineers, humanities, and medicine.

In China, most of these parents had only single children, as had been dictated to the urban elite; three bore their first children in Canada; and eight had a second child while living outside China. Over half the parents had children 10 years and under, and mothers had to find child care in order to work.

We interviewed couples in their native language. In the first 3-hour session, we gathered material on the husband’s and wife’s work, family histories, and other personal experiences, as well as on their social networks. Follow-up interviews and phone calls brought us up-to-date on these topics. We translated the taped interviews and analyzed them for themes, using N-Vivo, a qualitative software package. The text draws on our latest infor-
mation for the respondents, unless otherwise noted. We maintained contact with nearly all of them through December, 2002. In this paper we quote their comments directly, giving them pseudonyms and adding their gender in brackets after the comments.

WORK AND FAMILY ROLES IN CHINA

Social Policy and Family Practice in China

Educated Chinese women have public and private roles that are both sequential and simultaneous (Giele, 1998). The education of young Chinese professionals and skilled workers is sequential, determined by examinations that lead from one stage to the next. State educational and job placement systems, their performance and interests channel the educated elite into their adult roles. In force when most of our respondents got their first jobs, this system began to change in the 1980s following the introduction of a private labor market, with great consequences for our respondents’ careers (Bian, 1994; Nee & Matthews, 1996). After graduation from college, they found jobs and began to build careers. They marry and bear a child within the first year (Zeng, 1962, p. 6; Robinson, 1985; Whyte & Parish, 1984). Having single children is a political requirement, which allows them to devote themselves to work. The family is now seen as a smaller, leaner, even residual unit, whose tasks have lessened (Croll, Kane, & Davin, 1985).

Women and men remain in the labor force throughout their working lives. Work assignments are gendered, and males and females work in different sectors (Ngo, 2000). Nevertheless, educated women have made inroads into demanding professional, administrative, and skilled manual occupations. Although the market reforms harmed the position of working class and lower middle class women, successful professional and skilled workers increasingly earn high incomes, rewarding women for remaining on the job (Meng & Kidd, 1997). Both are represented in our sample.
Chinese family policy helps parents combine public and private roles. The city and the largest state work units operate day care centers and nursery schools. Although there are institutional shortages, there are adequate places for professional dual-career families. Moreover, those who work flexible hours can make use of around-the-clock services. On the other hand, women remain responsible for child rearing and caring, and many downplay careers when they conflict with family responsibilities, despite the fact that public support systems ease their work in balancing simultaneous careers and work family roles (Becker & Moen, 1999; Moen & Yu, 1999; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003).

Despite the availability of family support services for the educated elite, mutual obligations between family members remain central. Personal support systems provide social capital to ease meshing of work-family systems. These norms are traced back to the patrilineal Chinese family. Respect for broad family obligations continues, but these obligations are more mutual and negotiated today, giving family members a range of social supporters (Whyte & Parish, 1984). Each generation expects to benefit in the long run from mutual assistance (Yang, 1996). The elder generation wants to help professional sons and daughters—substantial earners in the family—meet their work responsibilities, as the professional wife’s earning potential is worth more than the time she might spend at household and other reproductive chores; and so children are the whole family’s responsibility (Chen, Short, & Entwisle, 2000).

Many parents of our elite couples are professionals in the urban state sector who retired early while still in good health. With small families themselves, grandparents are thus not overwhelmed with care requests. Co-residence further contributes to the sharing of reproductive tasks, as there was no private housing market until the mid 1980s and housing provided by work units was in short supply (Walder, 1986). Couples either delayed marriage until they had an apartment or lived with the older generation, who often had better housing. The seniors thus first gave young mothers childcare help; later, the seniors received
personal care in turn (Chou & Chi, 2001a). As a result, in the 1980s an estimated 25 percent of younger parents were living with their parents (Chen, et al., 2000; Davis, 1993; Tien & Lee, 1988).

In these ways, features of the wider context eased reciprocal care between generations. If proximity, social norms and structures underlay the social exchanges between female generations in the past, how do transnational migrants get the help from kin they need to work today?

**Respondents’ Social Support for Work-family Roles in China**

Respondents to whom we talked had met their range of childcare needs through complex patterns of family obligation and institutional care in China. If their elders were available, the young couples initially turned to them: seventy-one percent of our respondent couples received substantial childcare help from their seniors.

**Housing and child care.** Complex arrangements to get this help began before marriage, and included couples moving in with parents. Although these couples might have preferred more authority over their children, few had the time or the skills to exercise that authority.

Ying Ying (F), a computer scientist married to Chen Hung, an architect, relied considerably on her kin after she and her husband moved overseas:

My husband’s working unit was going to assign apartments, so we got married. But even after we had the baby, we hadn’t got the apartment yet. My father-in-law held a senior position, so he had a large apartment, and we lived with them. It was close to my work place. Later my working unit assigned me
an apartment, but we didn’t move there [so as not to lose parents’ help]. We lent it to my colleague.

Getting help for further study. The older generation’s help went well beyond occasional baby-sitting. Grandparents might take over the entire burden of caring for grandchildren and thus help their children build professional careers. Although our respondents finished their basic higher education before marriage, several returned to school for post-graduate study, and this dual burden often brought several family members in to help. Six couples were able to go abroad for jobs or schooling, all leaving their children behind with the children’s grandparents.

Cheng Li (M) was a metallurgical engineer, whose parents were retired teachers. First an engineer in a large public metal works, he transferred to a trading firm and was in charge of technical products. When the firm went downhill, Cheng Li returned to school for an MSc in another city. Throughout, his wife, Xing Ying, who worked as an administrative assistant, remained in her in-law’s home, where she could get help with her family. Her own mother, a retired factory worker, was ill and could not care for grandchildren. Xing Ying explained, “We could have gotten our own flat if we wanted (from the enterprise). But how could I take care of my baby on my own? I needed the help of my mother-in-law.” Xing Ying’s mother-in-law continued to care for her little girl in China for two years after the couple moved to Canada. With her burden reduced, Xing Ying became a student and reoriented her career.

Studying abroad created even more demands on kin. When his son was four years old, Chen Hung (M) won a coveted job in the Tokyo home office of the Japanese architectural firm where he worked. Ying Ying visited for a year, leaving their son in Beijing. Unable to find work in Tokyo, she returned to Beijing. A year later, she went to Holland to take an
MSc in Computer Sciences. The whole family reunited in Toronto several years later. Throughout the couple’s overseas sojourns, Chen Hung’s mother cared for her grandson.

Some migrants coordinated housing, further studies, and child-bearing plans in an all-round support system. Liuma (F), a doctor married to Zhu Ji, an electrical engineer, lived with Liuma’s parents after marriage, until Liuma’s father, a plant director, arranged a nearby apartment for them. When Liuma had a son, she moved back to her parents’ home and hired a baby-sitter. Her mother also helped after work. Liuma’s family continued their help for a year while the couple immigrated to Canada and could get on their feet there. She recalled, “I never felt the burden of raising a child!”

**Children’s school work.** There was some controversy over whether grandparents were apt teachers of grandchildren. Some parents felt relieved to have grandparents’ help, while others worried that they might be too protective. Nevertheless, all enjoyed some respite over having to do the hard time-consuming chores involved with family activities. Parents themselves could spare more time on their children’s schooling because the older generation took on a lot of family work. Chinese culture places parents in the role of mentor, who set the tone for, and even direct, their children’s education, and it was common, while in China, for the parents to study together with the child and supervise homework. By helping with the child’s courses, parents partly assumed the teacher’s role. Although parents were intensely busy with their own jobs, this family-wide division of labor, public institutions and servants freed parents to oversee and coach their children in their school work, and to enroll them in the wide variety of extra-curricular courses which had become a new ‘must’ for the one-child family. Possessing higher education themselves, these parents were confident and qualified to teach their children at home in China, and we were impressed by parents’ major investments in their children’s education.
Wei Yang, a school administrator, expanded her daughter’s interest in the world around her. An only child herself, after marriage she and her husband and child moved in with her parents. But Wei worried that her protected child was too introverted.

*I thought: there are few people in my family, and we lived in an apartment building, so she (Wei Yang’s daughter) had little contact with other people. Then I transferred her to Blue Sky Kindergarten, which was quite far from where we lived, …sometimes I drove our own car, but sometimes I deliberately took her on the bus so that she could see more. Then she became more open immediately. … And I also took her to some special classes during summer or winter vacation. … This school was very particular in choosing teachers; my daughter benefited a lot from this school. I believe it’s because of this school that my daughter could adapt so fast after we came. She studied English from kindergarten... At this school, English was taught by playing games, performing, etc. It was very interesting, not boring. She could always get A’s and A+’s. The kindergarten and primary school she went to were all key schools. … She also learned piano…

When she was young, I paid attention to taking her on trips. When we took her to Thailand, she was less than five years old, but she had a very deep impression of it. Every summer and winter vacation, I took her travelling all over China. She’s been to over 20 provinces and cities in China, and she’s been to four foreign countries.

Thus, in planning for the migration venture, Wei Yang worked to help her child make the transition.

**Multiplexity.** Our couples could rarely designate one grandparent to take responsibility throughout their children’s early years. Grandmothers had their own life courses and
it was not always possible to practice patrilineal ideals. As a result, most couples made use of helpers from either or both sides of the family at different times. However, the main caregiver was usually a grandparent, with the second caregiver a grandparent from the other side or a servant. Arrangements were flexible. If children were sent to nursery school, fewer helpers might be necessary than if they delayed school until kindergarten. Thirty-two parents got help from the senior generation to care for their young children. Two-thirds of these families that got support received help from the wife’s parents.

For example, Quping (F), who had a BA in social science, and her husband, Hu, a computer scientist, grew up in Beijing and found good jobs with private firms in Shenzhen. After their son was born, Hu’s mother came to care for the baby. She brought along Hu’s younger brother, a recent graduate, so that Hu could help look after him and help him find a job in Shenzhen. Mother Hu later returned to Beijing, but when Quping’s son was 2 1/2, he was sent to Beijing, as Quping thought Beijing schools were better. This time the boy lived with Quping’s parents. However, he could not adjust to the nursery school routine, and Quping brought him back to Shenzhen, where Quping took care of him, sending him to school in the morning and fetching him after work. Servants were hard to find, and Quping was afraid of bringing a stranger into her home, as rumors of child mistreatment were rife. Quping gave the example of a friend who hired a maid off the street, with tragic consequences: her friend was robbed, apparently by the servant, who left without a trace. “Fortunately her kid was staying with relatives outside of Shenzhen, and was okay.” The many types of support available, including that with food, helped Quping handle her household responsibilities after her child returned from school. “There wasn’t so much household work to do, so I could handle it. When we returned home late, we could easily find a place to grab a bite.”

Wei Li (F) and her husband Jigan (M) likewise used a number of helpers, mainly arranged through Wei Li’s kin. Jigan grew up in Hangzhou and went to university in Jilin province,
where he met Wei Li, who was born there. Wei Li took a government job in Beijing, and worked up to the position of vice-director of a division of a ministry. From that position, she helped Jigan get his first job in a research institute. They were some distance from both their parents. The couple married, and when they had a daughter, complex childcare arrangements began.

1988: Wei Li gave birth to her daughter in Hangzhou. Jigan’s mother helped care for her.

Mid-1988: Wei Li and child returned to Beijing. She took a further half-year’s leave to care for the child.

1989: Wei Li returned to her government job. Daughter went to Hangzhou to stay with her paternal grandparents.

1990: daughter returned to Beijing for nursery school. Wei Li and Jigan took turns sending and fetching her. Jigan recalled: “I stayed at the state-owned research enterprise for five and a half years and took very good care of my daughter. Sometimes I skipped work and was often late. At state-owned enterprises, you make less money but you have a lot more free time.”

1992: daughter was sent to Hangzhou for primary school.

1993: Jigan went to work at a foreign company. The couple moved into a larger apartment. Jigan’s mother moved to Beijing and lived with them, and took care of her granddaughter for half a year.


Jigan recalled: We changed several baby-sitters. Wei Li’s relatives introduced three helpers, including my wife’s niece. We paid her, but she didn’t work
much; she was lazy at our place. My wife ended up doing a lot of housework. Luckily, the other two baby-sitters from Jilin did a lot of work. So for five years, I never bought groceries or cooked. My wife seldom did any work, either.

In these ways, their wider kin and a range of helpers backed the career moves of these young parents.

Caring for their own children. Having the broad support of their families, only 9% of our couples (primarily those with no elders available) took primary responsibility for their children. The amount of time spent on the job was central to how they combined work and family roles. When both spouses held state sector posts, they often had a more relaxed schedule. In contrast, professional mothers that worked long hours could not squeeze in much childcare. Conditions in the private sector were especially demanding.

For instance, Hung’s (F) son was born during her light teaching stint in a Communist Party college, and Hung’s flexible job freed her to care for her child for a year. When her son turned two, Hung’s mother retired from her factory job and helped look after her grandson. When, by the third year, he was old enough for nursery school, Hung and her husband shared responsibility for dropping him off and picking him up.

Many private-sector jobs and some state jobs required long hours or travel. Xu Fang (F) had an accountant’s degree from Shenzhen University and a French MBA; her husband had an MA in biochemistry. They helped manage a branch of Xu Fang’s family’s private paint products firm. “In China, I didn’t have Saturday or Sunday free, every day was busy. I couldn’t even look after my baby, I hired two people to take care of him,” Xu Fang said.

**Scaling back.** Despite whatever help they might have had, women had overall responsibility for their children. Many altered their professional goals. Some wives delib-
erately shifted gears, transferring to more flexible jobs that did not demand long hours and travel in order to care for their children. Women tended to be loath to leave the stable state sector. Compared with their husbands, fewer took private sector jobs. For instance, a couple, both engineers, grew up in large peasant households and met when both were assigned to the same factory in Beijing, far from their families. The wife recalled how she could no longer be an engineer in a company, but could teach the subject:

*Both of us needed to work and no one helped us to take care of our child, so I shifted to teach in a secondary technical school. Because there were winter and summer holidays, it was more convenient for me to look after a child. I didn’t totally give up my major, but used my major just in a supplementary way.*

Post-graduate education was another example in which women fell behind their husbands. More men (30%) than women (6%) had further training after they married, including those with PhDs (four men, one woman). While their husbands returned to school, wives maintained the families, enabling their husbands to have both family and career.

Nevertheless wives continued to pursue careers as well. Only three wives quit their formal employment entirely to care for their children. Even these were not greatly disadvantaged: they worked from home, using their professional skills in the private market. For instance, one woman, alarmed at the slackness of her servants when one of her twin sons fell and broke his arm, quit her engineering job to care for the boys but did well trading stocks from home.

**Institutional care.** A minority of our respondents used state day-care facilities for very young infants and toddlers, mainly because there were no kin available.
Lei Min (F), a pediatrician from Sichuan, lived in Beijing. She recalled her long hours and the difficulties of balancing demands. When emergencies at work kept her on the job long hours, she could not care for her own child. She had to call on many others’ help.

_In China, I was so tired. When I had seriously ill patients I couldn’t go home for days until the babies were out of danger. My husband took care of home and the child when he was available. His parents were busy and couldn’t help us. Once, when I picked my daughter up from the kindergarten, she was the last one left. She was crying. Sometimes I asked my neighbor to pick her up._

Some of women’s roles, bridging work and family, were performed to ensure that their children had supportive home environments. School was often strict, instilling moral training and were required to care for themselves in many ways. Parents wanted their children to have intimacy and personal care. Moreover, they did not want to deny the older generation the chance to care for a grandchild. Hence, most placed their children in formal child-care institutions only after they were three or older.

Institutional care lacked the flexibility of grandparents’ care, and parents found the difference hard to bridge. However, it was possible to use formal day care when kin were ill, or when both parents’ jobs suddenly required them to travel. At these times, some parents turned to crèches as a last-minute support system.

After a maternity leave of four months, Ye He stopped breast-feeding and went to work. She left her daughter to her mother-in-law’s care. After work, she fetched her daughter home. It was tiring for her, because the little girl awoke at night. At age three, Ye He’s daughter went to a kindergarten near her mother’s home. It was difficult for the first several days, because her daughter had been used to her grandmother’s ways. The child would cry and Ye He had to bring her back home early. Eventually, Ye He’s mother resumed some of her care and brought her granddaughter to the kindergarten herself.
Few women were on their own caring for their children. The majority drew on their social capital. They expected to work, and their kin expected to help them work as a boost to the family earnings and future generations. Most got help from their personal relations or others connected through them. Past that, they could draw on the state-run crèches for childcare. By supplementing kin support with their own work, and scaling back on their demanding jobs, they carried work and family responsibilities - first sequentially, then simultaneously.

WORK-FAMILY ROLES IN CANADA

Social Policy and Family Practice in Canada

There seem to be more diverse patterns in the ways North Americans integrate their work and family life courses. Women go in and out of school and paid work at different times (Gerson, 1985; Giele, 1998:234-5; Partridge, in press). Jones, Marsden, and Tepperman (1990) point out that Canadian women adapt to paid work by individualizing their life patterns, including an increasingly fluid movement between adult statuses in domestic work, full time and part time work, and education.

North American working class women finish school, start their careers, marry and bear children, then leave the labor force to cope with household burdens (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). In 1995, one-third of Canadian women did not work while their children were infants. Other working mothers look to kin or neighbors for help, or take alternate shifts to care for their children (Deutsch, 1999). Immigrants may have split households, in which the mother works in North America while the children live with their kin in the home country, sometimes until they are teenagers (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parrenas, 2001).
Earlier cohorts of educated women returned to work, often in new careers, after their children grew older (Ginzberg, 1967). Professionally trained women today postpone having children until they finish their training. They may then stay in the labor force, finding other caregivers, paying for nannies (often new immigrants of color), working part time, or doing ‘telework’ (Hardwick & Salaff, 2003; Parrenas, 2001).

Lack of state commitment to childcare facilities contributes to this fluidity. Due to the incoherent and costly early childhood education system, Canadian childcare has become largely the private responsibility of parents (Doherty, Rose, Friendly, Lero, & Hope, 1995; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). Parents become strategists in order to combine professional work and family roles (Hochschild, 1990). Much of this is the work of women.

**Social Support for Work-family Roles in Canada**

From positions of relative gender equality in China, where they were also embedded in structures that support their careers and family roles, these immigrant wives have trouble gaining professional acknowledgment abroad (Salaff & Greve, 2003). They have to get Canadian professional certification, which sometimes entails repeating most of the education they have over again. They also bear most of the family responsibilities. Unlike in China, where women with young children to care for can perform roles sequentially, in Canada they have heavy simultaneous roles. Although their kin relations are far away, building supportive social networks for their reproductive roles is central for their careers, and they have a double burden.

**Their experiences as new immigrants in Canada.** Foreign-earned credentials are rarely recognized by Canadian organizations. Few Chinese immigrant wives locate well-paying jobs, and most revise their career goals (Basran & Zong, 1999; Salaff, Greve, & Xu, 2002; Spitze, 1984). Eighty-four of our 100 respondents experienced downward mobility from their positions in China.
Women suffer more than their husbands. With their professional credentials and experiences unrecognized, they need to retrain. Both parents’ skills need upgrading, both are responsible for their child, and they need to combine their household resources. Couples decide whether both should try to break into the labor force at the same time, each carrying simultaneous roles of caring for children, working, and retraining. Or should they negotiate a sequential life course—going to school full time, finding alternative care for their child, and then getting suitable jobs?

Engaging in sequential roles, one spouse may work full time, even at a minimal-wage job, to support the family, while the other returns to school to upgrade the credentials needed to adapt to the local labor market. They then may switch. When the wife’s English proficiency is better than her husband’s and the job she seeks does not need long term reaccreditation, she may be the first to enter the job market. If her English is worse and she has trouble fitting her technical and professional skills into acceptable Canadian jobs for women, she waits (Salaff & Greve, 2003). Most working parents compromise. Those with successful second careers scale back, reducing their goals, changing jobs slowly, finding help where they can, and building new relations in Canada, thus turning acquaintances into multiplex relations (Hochschild, 1990).

For instance, Jun (F), a dedicated manager and computer programmer in a private company, lived with her husband’s parents, but even with their help she found it necessary to reduce her work time in her fast-paced field. She admitted:

*After the baby was born, I changed a lot. Before, I worked like crazy, but now it seems I don’t care about it much. Work is not the focus of my life, taking care of the baby and the family is the focus, instead. And it’s very demanding.*

After moving to Canada, she quickly found a computer programming job. No longer under her in-law’s thumb, Jun was happy to take on more parenting. However, she had even less
time to spend with her son than in China. Since her job earns more than her husband’s, he scaled back his career goals. They worked their shifts to care for their child. Her husband, Tang, worked three days on and three days off, so that he could help with childcare. In emergencies, they used the help of their neighbor Quping, a former classmate in China and another of our respondents.

Tang: *I think the public day care environment is best for my son. What we’re concerned with most is illness spreads fast. He has been sick three or four times so far.*

Q: Then how do you deal with it when he’s sick?

Tang: *If I’m off, I’ll take care of him. If I’m not, my wife will ask for leave from work to take care of him. Once both of us couldn’t make it - we asked Quping to take care of him.*

Jun explained that her husband had delayed changing his job:

*[Now] his salary and his working time fit [our family needs]. For example, our baby was sick for a long time. In China, his grandma took care of him. Now, I have to do it on my own. It’s so hard. I asked for leave for enough days so my husband could change his shift with somebody else so that he could stay at home and take care of the baby. That’s very convenient. So for now, if our parents can’t come to help us, it’s good that he stays in that company.*

A year later, their child had adjusted to day care, and Tang could seek a more demanding job.

Most commonly, the wife’s career is placed second. Without a way to care for a child, and with longer to go to upgrade their degrees, wives are more likely to work at low paying
jobs. They shape their job searches around their responsibilities to the home, and hence their children’s ages figure in couples’ plans. To suit their family roles, women with young children take short-term, non-degree English as a Second Language (ESL) courses while their children are at school. Brief accounting courses improve their skills and get them entry-level jobs. By going to school part-time, women combine home-making, reproductive labor, and job preparation. Lian (F), a former accountant, weaves her ESL study with her son’s primary school hours:

*How many hours do I study at school? Everyday I send my son to school at 8:30, then I go to my school from 9:15 am till 2:45pm. When I get home, I study 10-20 minutes, then I go to pick up my son.*

**Developing new supports.** Those with young children share their childcare responsibilities with kin, friends and neighbors. Migration has not severed their family relations (Boyd, 1989), and kin are the most important supporters for those that are upgrading their skills. Just under half the respondents had children who were born since 1993. Even though they were living in Canada, with their family left behind in China, 63% could still arrange to get help for their children from kin. Many arranged for the grandparents to visit or immigrate. Others parents sent infants and toddlers back to China to be reared by their grandparents. Parents planned for the children to remain in China for the two years they needed to take courses to re-certify in professional fields, fetching the youngster back in time to enroll in primary school in Toronto.

In the following two cases, parents depended on their kin to help them and give them time to retool. In the first of two cases below, both spouses got new credentials at the same professional level they had enjoyed in China. In the second, however, the wife gave up the attempt to continue her profession.
(1) After working for Xu Fang’s (F) parents’ chemical firm, Xu Fang and Bofu (M) immigrated to Toronto. They took turns recertifying. Bofu first took a low-wage job, while Xu Fang took a several-months’ accounting course in a local college. Then Xu Fang got a junior accounting job in a Chinese firm while her husband took a short computer course. During the time that each spelled the other, one earning money while the other took community college courses and cared for their toddler, neither had well-paid jobs. Finally, the couple enrolled in graduate school in order to get fully re-qualified. Bofu took their two-year-old son to China to be cared for by Xu Fang’s parents until the couple could re-establish their careers. Xu Fang complained:

*We don’t have a strong economic base. If you ask someone to help you care for your child, you halve your income. If you ask me what’s the most difficult part being here, it’s that we’ve brought our child. Because of this child, we wasted half a year. I feel if I had gone to that school earlier, I could have found a job very soon. I think in your research, [you should point out that] this is the main difficulty. We wasted the time because of the child.*

During their first summer in graduate school, Xu Fang’s parents, and elder brother visited them, bringing their son along. When they saw how both were busy studying, they brought the lad back to China with them. Upon graduation, Xu Fang attained a good accountant’s job in a bank. Bofu returned to China to start his own business; the son remains there with him. They will be reunited when the family economy is stronger.

(2) Jun (F) graduated from a leading Shanghai university, majoring in obstetrics/gynecology, and after graduation worked as an ophthalmologist in a hospital attached to her university, qualifying by studying on her own. She passed several written English tests for her professional title, but seldom practiced English. Although her husband, Tang, was a proprietor of a computer company, Jun did not like to depend on him. She travelled four hours
by public transportation every day to work, for a modest salary. Tang’s mother cared for their small child. After landing in Canada, Jun could not find a job. She took care of her daughter herself for 6 months. Then Tang’s parents arrived to stay with them and took over childcare tasks. Jun began to organize her new career. She studied ESL for one year. She next attended a career training technical school in a two year program as a medical assistant skilled in running an electrocardiogram machine. She practiced in a Chinese run medical clinic with mainly Chinese patients. After graduation, that Chinese clinic offered her a job. However, her former training in ophthalmology was in greater demand, and they mainly asked her to attend to patients with eye problems. She accepted the low CAD 12 an hour wage, because she could remain in the field of medicine. Although the clinic wanted her to start working full time, but Tang told us, “I want her to have time to take care of our daughter, and working full-time won’t bring in a lot more income, just more tax.”

On the days that Jun worked, Tang sent their daughter to kindergarten. Their neighbor, whose daughter was in the same class, picked the child up and took care of her. When Tang got off work he fetched her from the neighbor’s house. In exchange, Jun helped the neighbor with their daughter when she was not working.

Our informants also mobilized friends for backup care. Former colleagues provided a basis for trust. And they met others, embedded in similar networks and sharing common backgrounds which conveyed cultural similarity, in the course of everyday life. With these they formed new multiplex networks.

Wei Yang (F) had her new roommate as backup support for her 10-year-old daughter. In China Wei Yang had obtained a major in Chinese literature and had been Vice-Principal of a high school, but she could not get a similar job in Canada. Her husband is an “astronaut,” who manages a computer-sales business in Beijing. He visits his Toronto family several times a year, leaving childcare entirely to his wife. Virtually a sole parent, Wei Yang is
reluctant to return to school or take a demanding full-time job. She first tutored her daughter and other youngsters part-time in Chinese, as a service to the Chinese community. She next had a multi-level marketing position and sold products part-time. Finally, she found full time work as a receptionist at a Chinese job agency. Her daughter, now used to Toronto, walks to the nearby primary school on her own. Wei Yang’s family sublets a room in a 2-bedroom high-rise flat from another Chinese immigrant woman with a daughter the same age as Wei Yang’s daughter, and her roommate watches out for Wei Yang’s child after school.

As she is unlikely to get a supervisory position at the level of the one she had in China, Wei Yang works with what is available in the Chinese community, where she has turned to sales and service work. She has found social capital in her Chinese roommate.

Ying Ying (F) took up an invitation to live temporarily at a friend’s that turned into a longer term responsibility.

_Our first summer in Toronto, my husband’s friend–whose wife was still in China–invited us to stay at their place (we had just arrived and had no place to live). After a few days, their son got chicken pox. My son got it, too. So the whole summer I was busy taking care of the two boys._

Although it is part of their social capital, immigrants cannot turn to friends for the longer-term support needed to return to school to requalify for professional positions. Therefore, neighbors stand in for each other and become each others’ social capital.

**Children’s studies.** Parents sought a good education for their children, and many mentioned education as a key reason for migration, but they found they did not understand the school system. Worse, many could not spare any time at all tutoring or boosting their child’s learning. A project manager who travelled to China for his Canadian firm worried
that he could not monitor his daughter’s school work on a daily basis. Those who worked overtime had the least time to spare. Some, reluctant to cut back on their hours in an uneasy job market, worked around the clock.

**Worst off are the petty entrepreneurs.** Many couples gave up efforts to rebuild professional careers, and several had resorted to entrepreneurship. Most feasible was the catering industry, where they could draw on their Chinese identities either to serve or to represent the ethnic enclave. These couples spent all their family time in the shop. Originally having moved abroad for their families’ sake, they saw the chief drawback of their small stores as the demands they made on parenting time, and felt unable to coach and care for their children (Li, 2003). Those with young families especially bewailed the lack of time for their youngsters. They could not provide their children with the special activities that the children of their better-off professional peers enjoyed.

When Dong Jian and his wife could not get steady employment, they took over a fast-food takeout counter in a food court. Their daughter I-fei was in kindergarten. The family brought in a small TV and laid out a thin mattress under the buffet table behind the counter. Dong Jian complained:

*We’re totally exhausted. The only thing we want after work is to lie down and sleep. … From 10 in the morning to 9 or 10 or even 1 in the morning, we don’t stop. When there aren’t many customers, we prepare the meat, cut the veggies. When we get home, sometimes we just lie down right away and have no strength for anything else.*

I-fei spent her afternoons after kindergarten, and her weekends, here in the kitchen of the takeout counter. Friends helped to send and retrieve her, since her parents had no time at all. After school, the tyke watched videos, worked on her coloring and story books, or napped.
That’s the only way for her. We have no other solutions. My friends in China, their kids go to all kinds of hobby class at her age. But she has to spend her time here in the kitchen, Dong Jian remarked remorsefully.

**Children’s roles.** Studies of immigrant children note that many take on nurturing roles, grow up quickly and help the parents.

No longer part of on-site, three-generational households, and without additional family help, mothers bear considerable household burdens (Clarkberg & Moen, 2001). Parents demand a lot from their children, and justify coming abroad as a benefit for the youngsters. Their children take on the burden of immigration, become independent, and working hard. Although parents left China for a variety of reasons relating to moving their own careers forward, their child now becomes the justification for moving. Children care for themselves and the family more than they had done in China. Teenagers get their first part-time jobs, and/or help out in the family business. They study hard. Several parents proudly informed us that their children had gotten into gifted primary-school programs, or that older children had been accepted at university and given scholarships.

A few examples illustrate how children manage on their own. Wei Yang’s (F) younger daughter went to the neighborhood school on her own; Ying Ying’s (F) teenage son made his own lunch in the microwave; and, on summer holiday from his computer engineering studies, Jiang Jing’s (M) son worked in a factory and filled in at the family store in the evenings. Lei Min (F) recalled, when her husband Chao Xiao worked in a factory as a meat cutter, it was his daughter’s achievement that sparked his optimism despite their hard life.

Q: You work at the same shift as your husband, so what about your daughter?

Lei Min (with demonstrable pride): *We prepare dinner for her and bring our dinner to work. She can take care of herself. She’s very independent. My hus-
band said he didn’t shed a sad tear over the hard life here, but when I told him that she got second in her class during the first semester (although her English was still not so good) his happy tears mixed with the smell of meat (the sweat of his laboring job).

When Lei Min opened a hostel for new immigrants in her home, her 14-year-old daughter spent the summer greeting guests.

**Intensifying Family Roles**

Some women find new family roles. In contrast to China, where bearing a second child was politically damaging for those with high standing, in Canada bearing two children is “natural.” Six of the couples had second children in Canada, and nearly all with second children had first borne daughters.

Hen Rong (F), a former accountant in China, became a textile laborer in Toronto. When she became pregnant, her kin and friends pressured her and her husband to have the second child. “This is your last chance;” her mother admonished her pregnant daughter. Her mother had cared for the couple’s eldest daughter, and the couple sponsored her to immigrate. The older woman beamed as she toted the baby boy around.

A former pharmacist, now a sales clerk, justified her second pregnancy by what she saw around her. “We see Canadians around us having a child, and so decided it was natural.” Unable to resume her profession, she finds a new role in intensified motherhood. Her fellow church members celebrated the pregnancy with showers and gifts.

The second child not only meets the long-cherished value of bearing a son for the family - the new birth turns an aborted career, with a confusing prognosis, into the respected career of motherhood. None of the new mothers re-established their careers. Without childcare
support in the new location, gender roles thus may become entrenched (Lee, Chan, Bradby, Green, 2002; Man, 1995; Willis & Yeoh, 2000a, 2000b).

**DISCUSSION**

Transnational migration affects women and men in gender-specific ways and places a heavier load of responsibility on women’s shoulders. This occurs in both home and host countries, but migration makes the integration of work and family systems difficult. Taken-for-granted work institutions, retirement schemes, and formal and informal childcare rarely mesh well with each other. When this is the case, women’s personal actions make these arrangements run on schedule. Women must organize support that requires a creative re-organization of their social capital under the new conditions.

Since work and family institutions are organized differently in every country, when catapulted into a new social system, immigrants experience conflicts in timing work and family courses. In China, professionals complete training before bearing and rearing children, following the sequential life course model. Most draw on multiplex ties to fulfill work and family obligations while building their careers. They also obtain public-institutional childcare services, thus lessening the number of activities they have to do simultaneously.

Arriving as professionals in Canada, where their qualifications are not recognized, with small children to care for and households to run, they have heavy burdens. They must requalify and mobilize support for the fulfillment of family roles at the same time. Both formal institutions and informal, personally constructed arrangements for childcare differ from those in China. When social arrangements in Canada do not match their needs, women either leave the labor force, rework previous arrangements or create new multiplex arrangements. They may bring their parents to Canada or send their children to China. For many, social capital is transnational.
Transnational motherhood is not limited to the working-class poor, but also is known by middle-class, highly educated Chinese. Professional, career-oriented Chinese immigrants command a future promise of good resources and earnings for their wider families—if they get support. They bring their mothers and mothers-in-law, or send their children back to China. For some women, this support lets them reconstitute their careers; but others suffer considerable downward professional mobility. Transnational social capital facilitates, but does not guarantee, a rejuvenated career.

Work-family role conflicts are public issues needing institutional solutions, but few countries define them this way (Folbre, 2001; Mills, 1957). Societies rarely acknowledge the informal work that people do to mesh institutional structures. People draw on personal relations to resolve inconsistent demands. The plight of international migrants outlines the problems encountered in using personal solutions to deal with public issues.

REFERENCES


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