Chinese Immigrant Women:

From Professional to Family Careers

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Chinese Immigrant Women

ABSTRACT

We investigate labour market outcomes of Chinese immigrants in Canada focusing on the impact of career change on women as they enter the Canadian labour market. The sample includes men and women with higher education, from the People’s Republic of China. Applying an institutional approach, we discuss how professions are institutionalised into segmented labour markets with specific expectations of education and career paths. We analyse how skills, careers and gendered occupational roles are institutionalised differently in the two countries and how skills and gender roles mismatch is particularly disadvantageous towards women. Although men are slightly better educated than women, there were considerable equality in their career outcomes in China. Entering Canada, many face problems in the labour market. Employers do not accept their credentials and most land low-level jobs. Women have the worst outcomes; not only does required credentials work against them, but so do gender-specific work roles. Many women turn their energies to their families and have a second child. The institutional approach explains how professions constitute rules of the labour market and how social systems create gender roles for work and family life. Moving from one institutional setting to another breaks careers because the two systems are not integrated and are incompatible with regard to credentials and gender work roles.
1. INTRODUCTION

As developed countries vie for highly educated immigrants to boost their skills and population, we need to attend to what happens to those they attract. Canada’s skilled-based immigration system accepts hundreds of thousands of migrants each year, mostly professionals and technical workers. Since 1998, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has contributed the largest number averaging 37,000 annually (2000-2) (Statistics Canada 2002). The findings on the fates of these people are unsettling. Far from reaching their potential in the countries of their dreams, new immigrants find skills overlooked and downgraded. They suffer low waged jobs and unemployment (Basran and Zong 1999; Chard et al. 2000; Li 2000; Schoeni 1988; Tang 1993; Wright and McDade 1992). This unexpected reception forces some into confusion and despair. Others change tack. They find that whereas building a small private family based on consumerism and energetic parenting was disdained in China, it is prized in the West. Leaving their aborted careers behind, they turn to family roles (Ho 2004; Zhou 2000). We need to understand conceptually how this change comes about. The meaning of this shift is also economically and politically crucial. If an immigrant society cannot make available employment opportunities, it wastes its people’s human capital. It also denies their basic citizenship rights (Tatsoglou and Dobrowolsky 2006). In this paper, we explore the two-fold issue of why new immigrants from China, especially women, get bad jobs, and why they embroider family goals. We draw on a qualitative study of 50 couples from the PRC who recently migrated to Canada.

Our project has two aims: to evaluate why the international training of professionals and technically skilled workers is overlooked after immigration and to suggest some of the reasons for their choice of alternative roles. We present institutional theory as a framework to lo-
cate the mechanisms that channel immigrant female Chinese professionals into lower status jobs in Toronto, and into home based roles.

In the pages that follow we first critically discuss competing conceptual frameworks that explain the difficulties new immigrants face in getting good jobs, and find them lacking. We introduce the institutional approach as a broader perspective to understand the gender and ethnic stratification of the labour market and the ways in which the family and the labour market fit together. From an institutional perspective, we can examine the social construction of valuable skills and what employers perceive as a ‘proper’ career. We explore diverse views of women’s roles in family and the structural arrangements that underlie how women combine family roles with careers. We then turn to our study methods and the characteristics of our sample couples. Part 2, “Getting Skilled” compares the structure of professional jobs and their distribution by gender in Canada and China. Part 3, “Institutionalising Family Roles,” explores the Institutionalised environment that constructs gendered family roles in Canada, which differs from their experiences in China. We observe that as women have difficulty entering the workforce, they turn to more traditional ‘female’ roles to integrate into Canadian society, reorienting their energies toward domestic duties within the family. Our qualitative study finds that many of these immigrant women have experienced the journey from accomplished careers in one cultural setting to elaborate motherhood roles in another.

1.1. Institutional theory in the research of labour markets

There are competing explanations of the barriers blocking skilled immigrant workers from good jobs. Human capital theory has entered the popular lexicon for how people translate their skills into employment. According to this theory, people’s skills and work experiences predict work performance and the kind of jobs they get. They also need social skills and
knowledge of the business culture to work effectively. They exchange these resources, or their human capital, in the market (Becker 1964). Employers pay higher wages to employees with more skills. In this framework, the labour market is a neutral administrative mechanism, matching job seekers and employers. This matching process is objective. New immigrants have to conform to the qualities of mainstream job holders to become integrated into the market (Li 2004). Proponents of this concept believe that if new immigrants cannot get good jobs, it is because they cannot do the work. As we will see, before gaining entry to Canada, Chinese immigrants often hold elite jobs in their professions. Compared with their immigrant forerunners decades earlier, they arrive with exceptional qualifications. Human capital theorists might retort that their foreign degrees are not up to par with local credentials. Without the time to learn indigenous cultural skills, they cannot manage others. Consequently, immigrants with foreign degrees who had previously managed workers in China are segmented into lower status white or blue collar jobs.

Opponents of the human capital perspective do not see the market as rational. They charge that denying jobs to immigrants and rejecting job seekers of colour or with an accent from high-level positions has little to do with the neutral evaluation of people’s skills (Billingsley and Muszynski 1985; Bauder 2003). Racism is based on homophily, or fear of the unfamiliar. Gender discrimination, also a fear of the unknown has its own trajectory. Tracing the occupations of immigrant women and men of different races in California over a decade, Wright and Ellis (Wright and Ellis 2000) find that Chinese men improve their position faster than Chinese women. We need to understand how society’s gender and racial discrimination act together to propel new immigrants onto diverse paths.
The concept of the social construction of roles addresses how people’s life choices are put together in accepted ways. According to the human capital contention, women and men are suited to certain jobs by their qualifications; however, applying a gendered lens they fit into socially constructed categories of suitable jobs. This query inform us about the channelling of women into ‘feminine’ work and family careers. DeBouvoir’s classic, The Second Sex ((DeBouvoir 1997) 1949), traced the origin of Western gender precepts to the roots of Western philosophical tradition. Betty Friedan %Friedan 1984 added recent socialisation themes to explain why educated women abandon their careers after childbearing in favour of mothering. We approach these issues through analysis of institutional arrangements.

To help analysis, we want an independent measure of the variables for these different concepts. Human capital theory accuses those that do not get hired with lacking the skills needed to do the work, but rarely questions whether these competencies are truly inherent in doing a job. Human capital theory takes credentials as the standard substitute for skills. Professions increasingly demand degrees, so that more work requires local certification (Bills 2003; Collins 1979). Further, the credentials and training of new immigrants are often devalued against local credentials without being evaluated, and this point is crucial (Wright and McDade 1992; McDade 1988). With few tests for human capital assertions, it is hard to avoid circularity. Moreover, the concepts we use must account for cross cultural differences in gendered occupations in societies. They need to explain change in rates of hiring immigrants, and proportions of immigrants in different fields. Yet few of these broad concepts discussed relativize the social structure they are studying.

Institutional theory incorporates many of these explanations to study the social structure of the labour market that receives workers. Several features of institutional theory are most use-
ful for us. First, institutional theorists argue that labour markets, their occupations and professions, are socially constructed. The so-called suitable qualities for jobholders are linked to the local context, they are not inherent in the job. Racial and gender characteristics are often attributed to immigrants, which are then seen as features of foreign credentials (Bauder 2003). New immigrants are channelled into jobs that employers believe suit their qualities, or fail to get jobs because they are seen as lacking these qualities. For instance, skilled computer specialists from Asia have become rank and file programmers in many North American firms, but are seen as unsuited to supervise (Fernandez 1998).

The career, which forms the job paths of professionals, is also socially constructed. Professionals are expected to conform to norms of what constitutes a proper career. A professional’s career starts with education, apprenticeship and certification, followed by successive jobs with increasing responsibilities and managerial content. Professions are embedded in social structures, or organisational fields. The social structure consists of repeated patterns of behaviour, norms and expectations, which appear necessary. The interpretations of what constitutes a professional are taken for granted, and operate unconsciously as a set of internalised symbolic representations of the world (Scott 2001). In particular, North American professional labour markets are protected against competition from other occupational groups. They create a professional labour market only for those within that profession, and each profession has its own labour market (Boyd and Thomas 2001; Osterman 1984). Employers expect professionals to come from certain schools, get particular jobs, and become certified and recognised in the professional community, thereby Institutionalising the experiences and training of applicants. Institutional theory does not deny talent or training, but argues that the properties of human capital are what professionals recognise, and that these are culturally specific.
Institutional theory spotlights the ‘deviant career’ as a problem. If managers recognise the career paths of job applicants, they will rarely question whether the applicants are able to do the job. People with deviant career paths, whose career structures do not follow familiar patterns, will have trouble being accepted as legitimate contenders for professional jobs. Their degrees are not taken at face value, and they are excluded. Such exclusion strikes at a number of groups. Immigrants with foreign credentials are especially hit hard (Boyd 1985; Richmond 1984). Trades in various countries view the stages in a professional career differently. Career milestones are not universally valued. Consequently, professionals and technologically trained employees who immigrate today must find new ways to in the new society to develop their careers to continue their achievements.

Finally, career ladders are gendered. Professional labour markets that channel women and men into separate careers vary between countries (Boyd 1990; Hanson et al. 1996; Kofman 2000). The engineering and technologically dominated education and professional credentials that earned them recognition in their home countries are less celebrated in the new setting, and females are not expected to take these jobs. As a result, immigrant women run up against two institutional barriers: a career path that lacks legitimacy and an unrecognised match between gender and occupational choice.

On the whole, institutional theorists expect that social structures will block immigrants’ ability to use their talents, and newcomers may never be accepted as professionals. Instead, they need to develop different, locally recognised skills. For women, one set of important, underdeveloped skills is their family, especially their mothering roles.
Institutional theorists note that the social definition of women’s family roles and their fit with the labour market is also socially forged. Writers pinpoint societal differences in the relation of institutions to each other. Brinton (Brinton 2001) shows how an institutional perspective helps us understand how women’s work and family roles in three Asian nations are constructed differently. The institutional perspective helps assess which of women’s roles are most honoured, and whether there is support for them to achieve their valued roles. In the sphere of reproductive activities, some of women’s work is done within the family with state assistance. State institutions directly do other work with family support. These structures vary in different national settings with consequences for what women do.

Women’s family roles may be honoured in most societies, but some societies make it easier for them to achieve these roles. Explanations for women’s job switches from careers to family roles are linked to these contexts. There are also choices within every society (Ronsen and Sundstrøm 2002). Segmental assimilation, a more refracted version of socialisation theory, encourages us to look into social networks and reference groups for variations in immigrants’ choices. As Connell (Connell and 2002): 76-85) argues, the ethnic pluralism of contemporary society produces multiple patterns of masculinities and femininities. Unable to find good jobs, Chinese immigrant women in New York (Zhou 2000) and Sydney (Ho 2004) turn towards family social roles. Zhou argues that these new arrivals emulate American women that they see around them, who emphasise family roles before careers. Ho (Ho 2004) hints that their family roles were repressed while these women lived in China. In the West, they can find pleasure in the turn toward mothering, while taking up less prestigious jobs with so-called feminine content (Remennick 2003).
We thus need to learn how immigrant women saw their lives both before and after migrating. Their earlier jobs and their views of mothering in China will be compared with their lives as international migrants. Throughout, the institutional structure in which their roles are embedded will be understood to forge the framework in which they make decisions.

2. METHODS

The 50 couples that we study migrated to Canada from 1996 to 2001, the majority in 1999. The husband was the chief applicant in 46 cases, but both spouses had good education, some English language ability, and a profession. Finding a job in Canada before landing was not required. All were married couples with dependent children to support. They had to get jobs quickly. Most try to find jobs in their professions. One, but rarely both, might have delayed the job search while studying English.

There were gender differences in age, education and field of study. The respondents averaged 35 years of age at immigration, with the men slightly older. Their median year of birth was 1963 of the males and 1965 for the females.

In China, our elite sample earned high degrees and enjoyed on-the-job opportunities to upgrade their skills. The credentials and fields of our women and men in the sample overlapped, yet there were fairly distinct gendered profiles. The vast majority has bachelor degrees or higher, but men had more education. Women accounted for nearly all of those with college diplomas and high school degrees. Five respondents had Ph.D.s, only one of whom were female; fewer women than men were Master degree holders (10 of 30) (see Table 1).
Table 1: Degree by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ph.D.</th>
<th>Master</th>
<th>Bachelor</th>
<th>College diploma</th>
<th>High-school</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ChiSquare = 16.7, p = 0.002

The wives tended to be younger and have less education than their husbands. However, these tendencies were not marked. At the time they left China, nearly half of the husbands and wives in the sample had the same educational level (21 couples). Moreover, the degrees held by 20 couples differed by only one educational level; only 9 couples had two levels difference in their degrees.

Table 2: Occupation by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Engineer &amp; science</th>
<th>Computer science</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Health services</th>
<th>Humanities &amp; others</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ChiSquare = 18.62, p < 0.001

Fields of study were also gendered. Most of the respondents were in technical fields: two-thirds in engineering, accountancy and computer science. While women also pursued science and technology majors, more were in humanities and non-science areas than men. Medicine
and accounting were strongly feminized. These gender variations figured in their different outcomes of job searching in Canada (see Table 2).

We located half of our contacts through the rosters of a large NGO immigration agency in Toronto soon after they landed. The agency, which offers ESL classes and workshops on job searching to 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 (for a snowball sample). Our longitudinal research charts the progress of these couples in finding jobs over a two to five year period. This period, while short, is enough to reveal how those in various professions and with diverse experiences and personal characteristics adapted to the Canadian labour market. Referring to Israel, Remennick %(Remennick 2003) finds that few immigrants change their job status past this point.

The immigrants we study are a suitable group for assessing how professional and skilled women and men are channelled into jobs. While we do not claim that our sample represents the range of Chinese immigrants in Toronto, our respondents were not atypical. Most recent emigrants from China are well educated and from urban centres (Liang 2001; Statistics Canada 2002). To some extent, the agency’s rosters were slanted towards those who could not find professional jobs through friends, agents or otherwise on their own. Yet we also found that those we met through personal contacts also signed up for agency workshops, to gain a vista onto Canada. Furthermore, few in our sample, whether participants in the NGO or those we met through snowballing, knew well established locals who could tell them about good jobs.
The chief author, as principal investigator, carried out most of interviews in Mandarin, aided by Chinese research assistants, also recent immigrants from the PRC. We used 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 the families of husbands and wives and work histories and personal networks. Follow ups kept us current with their work and family experiences. We averaged 2.4 interviews with each respondent couple, and updated most information through to the middle of 2003. Quotes from the cases are followed by a pseudonym, gender, degree and major.

3. GETTING SKILLED: China and Canada

Social and cultural forces create shared understandings and expectations about organisational practices that bear on the job status of immigrants. The structure of Chinese and North American professional fields differ widely, rendering the experiences of these professionals a poor learning ground for gaining recognition in Canada. Entry into the professions has been difficult.

3.1. China’s Centralised labour Force Structure

China did not have an open market for education, labour, or professional roles when most of our respondents got their first jobs. Strong state controls shaped students’ skills, their choice of majors, and length of schooling. Students took national tests for university entrance. The labour market was organised around state sector firms, which operated like internal labour markets. Workers who entered a particular firm at the start of their careers and remained there, were rewarded for their experiences in the firm (Kalleberg 2000; Williamson et al.
This system, which gave the Chinese state and the work unit power over professional hiring, had major implications for our sample (Bian 1994; Walder 1986). First, professional bodies were subordinate to state strictures. Next, gender differences existed, yet were minimal; elite women and men used their education, becoming full professionals.

The state dominated system began to change in the 1980s with great consequences for careers. The labour market has 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 (Davis 2000a; Walder 1989). The foreign sector now exposes workers to a performance based management system, which makes great demands on their time and energy, but rewards their accomplishments. Employees can travel widely, go abroad for training, return to school for further degrees, and may use English at work. Labour mobility has increased. China’s professionals became interested in migration to see how they would fare in the home territory of such firms.

The strong state presence in hiring helped to equalise advantages for women workers at the time our cohort entered the labour force. During the Cultural Revolution, women were exhorted to work hard and put their jobs ahead of personal goals. When the Cultural Revolution ended and schools reopened in 1977, intelligent women who passed the tests entered university alongside their brothers, often in high-tech or engineering areas. In a time of scarce human resources, women who received more education and experience got ahead.

It is true that by the mid 1990s, on the eve of the departure of our sample from China, re-gendering was taking place, especially in the private sector (Dong et al. 2004; Hanser 2005). Nevertheless, this sample of elite women experienced a strong demand and high rewards for
their skills (Shu and Bian 2003). It was considered important for educated women like these to deploy all their talents, as seen through a comparison of job status by gender.

That these women performed well as professionals can be seen from the jobs they held in China. We order the jobs our sample held as high-, medium-, and low- status. Highest ranked are fully fledged professionals, holding bachelor degrees or higher, whose fields require professional certification. Examples are architectural designer, doctor, engineer, dentist and construction site manager. Middle-status semi-professionals, with bachelor degrees or diplomas, in white collar jobs do not manage others. Examples are computer programmer, delivery coordinator, sales person, and construction site supervisor. We refer to skilled clerical workers with high school education as low status-jobs.

Women and men with the same level of education in the same occupations were likely to have the same job status. Yet women’s lower educational level limited their opportunities. As men were more likely than women to have technical education and higher degrees, they were more likely to be high-status professionals. Furthermore, Chinese organisations discriminate against women for positions that involve managing other people (Chen et al. 1997; Korabik 1994; Yeung et al. 2004). Although engineers are most likely to become managers later in their careers, fewer female engineers than men in our study became managers. Institutional factors like these gave rise to gender differences.

After the economy changed, women were less likely to transfer to joint venture or private sector jobs: 29 men compared to 17 women shifted to the private sector. Demand for their specialities figured in the switch of job sector. The private sector courts engineers and fewer women than men had studied engineering. Computer scientists, secretaries, saleswomen, and
accountants are also recruited into the private sector. However, medicine, education, and certain other fields, in which many women specialised, remain in the state sector.

Despite these differences, there was considerable job equality within the couples in our study. In half of the couples (25), husbands and wives held the same status jobs, 19 couples were one status level apart and only 5 differed by two levels (Table 3). Few women (4) held higher status jobs than their husbands; more wives held lower status jobs than their husbands. In sum, holding positions of high job status and gender equality in China were the core experiences of the elite (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Male past job level by Female past job level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 8 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F semi-prof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 8 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 2 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F skilled clerical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 2 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 10 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78 20 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Canada’s Decentralised Labour Force Structure

The substantially different labour market in Canada creates an institutional structure in which their work roles and earlier experiences are misunderstood and misrepresented. In Canada’s decentralised accreditation system, certified professional education channels people into spe-
cific career streams that are exclusively there for each profession. These structures further give the profession its own governance framework and norms of conduct (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 2001). Professional associations and hiring bodies are designated to judge immigrants’ credentials fitting or faulty. Employers hire according to rules of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989).

By controlling labour supply through certification and licensing, professional associations create monopolies on positions and services. Many close entry to those with foreign education. To practice in the protected professions, immigrants with an international education must pass Canadian courses and examinations, and repeat part or all of their schooling. In addition, they need a stint of supervised employment in Canada to qualify, whether in a residency (medical doctors) or apprenticeship (architects and engineers). The process of re-certification varies for each profession and each subspecialty (Iredale 1997). This process, which has not been altered to reflect the accomplishments of skilled worker immigrants, can take several years. There are no stipends during this time. Without re-certification, foreign educated specialists cannot hold responsible positions in their line of work. Apart from the professions, entry to some trades, such as tool and die making, is also licensed (Brouwer nd).

The majority of our 100 men and women respondents were in professional fields in China that are protected in Canada. They needed to re-certify before they could practice, and few of our sample re-qualified, with more men than women having done so. Instead of retraining in their professional positions, they entered allied semi-professional or technical positions. Drawing on their technical skills, they were grateful to be able to use some of their original interests and training. Nevertheless, these positions were far below the full professional fields in status, earnings, and authority.
Most of those we met compared their position in Canada with their high standing before they left China. In doing so, many had clearly lost footing (Man 2004). Whereas in China, the majority were professionals, in Canada professionals no longer predominated. More men than women held professional and semi-professional positions. Only one was doing better than she did in China. Fifteen women and men retained their job status. The rest, 84 of the respondents, have dropped one or more professional status ranks (from high to medium or low status jobs). More women than men were in low status, skilled or unskilled labour, or clerical work (34% compared to 28% men). Otherwise, they were out of the labour force entirely (36% of the women compared to 12% men). Women had fallen further away from their original fields than men. There were still no female professionals, and a minority were semi-professionals (see Table 4).

Table 4: Male vs. Female job levels in Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Count Total %</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Not in labour force</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in labour force</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differing social structures in Canada and China shape who gets good or bad jobs, as seen in the institutional mechanisms which set diverse patterns of occupational stratification by gender in different societies. First, education is an important part of the skilled worker’s career profile. However, since few of their educational achievements in China are acknowledg-
edged in Canada, the levels of degrees do not match the jobs people get. The Ph.D is the only degree which gets currency, as a research degree.

Testifying to the importance of the local recognition of workers’ paths, joint venture experience is a familiar frame of reference in Canada, and is valued more than work in state sector firms. Those who had worked in a joint venture had done somewhat better than the rest: Two engineers, both men, who had worked in IBM and Caterpillar Tractor in China, got jobs through networking within these international companies. 20 of the 28 who had gained professional or semi-professional status in Canada had joint venture or foreign experience backgrounds. Gender enters the scenario once again. Since women are under-represented in the private sector compared with men, they did not have the advantage of working in joint ventures.

While many of our respondents had become managers in China, management is rarely viewed as an appropriate position for Chinese immigrants, who are presumed to lack cultural skills. Their employers accept their technical ability but are blind to leadership or creative potential.

(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 a second language for us, we cannot speak as fluently as they can or write as well as they can. 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, B.Sc. Computer Science)
It rarely occurs to employers that today’s managers are likely to manage new immigrants like these. Institutional barriers most affect job attainment for those in the controlled professions, such as engineering and medicine, which were common in our sample. What has happened to these former professionals reveals how gender inter-plays with labour institutions. Thirty-six of the respondents (9 females; 27 males) were educated as engineers in China and were evenly spread from high to low job levels in Canada. Three male engineers had succeeded in re-qualifying. Male engineers dominated those who did well, with a few becoming full professionals. Seven of the eight respondents who had attained full professional status in Canada were male engineers. Most male former engineers aimed at technician jobs, drawing on similar technical skills, learning on the job or re-qualifying in college courses to become certified. Others became computer programmers or process engineers.

In contrast, not only had no Chinese trained female engineer retained her professional standing, but few had attained a positions in allied fields. Women who had been engineers lacked the same resources that enabled their male counterparts to obtain high and middle status engineering related jobs in Canada. None had a Ph.D. in engineering, none had worked in internationally recognised joint ventures, and hence they could not access the networks of these overseas firms. Different gender roles in the labour market also figured strongly in the picture. Whereas engineering is considered a respectable job for women in China, Canadian women are not visible in applied technical fields. ² Lower level technical jobs are even more sharply gendered. Women who have been engineers cannot easily take up skilled technical positions that are not well accepted for women in Canada. Only one female respondent had

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² Although the number of women is increasing in Canadian engineering departments, they do not hold parity with men (Hughes 2001). Women represented 55% of all undergraduate students in Canadian Universities in 1997, but only 21% of those enrolled in engineering programs. Furthermore, in 1999 less than 5% of practicing engineers in Canada were women (Zwyno et al. 1999).
entered, and another was completing training for tool and die work. Most of the female former engineers worked as unskilled garment seamstresses or clerical workers, or in other low status jobs, where the most they could aim for is to become supervisors.

Those who studied medicine in China had the most trouble obtaining high status jobs. Chinese physicians had practised in the state sector before emigrating, and had few multinational links to comparable institutions in Canada. As their training was not recognised in Canada, they had to redo exams and residencies. Whereas they took their professional training in the Chinese language, re-qualification exams were in English. Only 1 of the 5 women physicians in our sample, Liuma, was in the process of re-certifying to practice. Most of the women bowed to family economic needs, choosing to take up ordinary jobs instead of re-certifying for their profession. However, former doctors more easily drop one level to enter the feminized positions of medical technicians or research assistants (Remennick 2001). For instance, a former ophthalmologist in our sample had re-qualified as an x-ray technician. The short staffed clinic where she worked part time often asked her to do eye exams and other related tasks, for which she was not paid. In these two professions of engineering and medicine, institutional factors overrode market mechanisms in hiring for higher status jobs.

In sharp relief, information science is unprotected and computer scientists with international education are not blocked by regulations from re-entering the profession. Women enjoyed equal opportunities in this field, although, even here, mainly North American experience is recognised. Employees have to prove themselves through their work, not their resumes, to move forward. Past getting a job, institutionalised understandings block them from full recognition. Employers, not understanding their backgrounds, often ignore their experience,
relegating them to entry level positions in their fields, taking advantage of them as a cheaper labour force (Basran and Zong 1999; Fernandez 1998).

This company has the position of entry level programmer. (You mean for people who don’t have experience?) Yes, but for people like me, they use me as entry level programmer, too! (Because your experience is not Canadian?) Yes. Then if you do well, they raise your salary. (Yangyi, F, B.Sc. Computer Science)

Those of the respondents whose international experience was acknowledged did the best. After Lei Hong, a computer scientist, encountered a former colleague from a foreign firm in Shanghai, her colleague attested to her abilities and introduced her to his supervisor. Lei Hong landed a position as senior analyst.

The company I’m in now, Sprint, was introduced to me by a colleague whom I got to know when I was doing a project in the Singaporean company I worked for [in Shanghai]. His [Toronto] 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 his manager, who’s from Hong Kong and can speak English and Cantonese, understands very well the situation in China. If you talk with the native bosses here, and you tell them what you have done, sometimes their understanding is different, because we are referring to different things with the same words. (Lei Hong, F, B.Sc. Computer Science)

Women trained in information technology can often find positions nearly as good as those they left behind, although rarely with managerial status. Many are solid earners, although the downturn of the field after 2000 put both women and men in a precarious position. As a result of men’s far greater opportunities than women’s, the equality of job status within the surveyed couples had decreased in Canada. Only 12 couples had jobs at the same status level, 16 couples were one level apart; 8 couples were separated by 2 levels, and 4 couples were three
job levels apart. The number of female respondents who were not working far exceeded that of male respondents. By moving to Canada, these Chinese women had lost equality of status with their husbands.

4. INSTITUTIONALISING FAMILY ROLES

There are patterned expectations about how women combine family and careers. The collective, whether state or kin, can play a role or remain aloof from helping working families handle dual careers. Chinese and North Americans combine work and family roles in different ways.

4.1. Institutionalised Family Roles in China

China’s formal institutional structures that push professional women to pursue careers downplay family life in favour of civic goals. For most of their lives daily life for women in China is not oriented to consumer goods. Career breaks for family reasons are minimised. Women are permitted a single child and are fined for bearing more. Socialisation into citizenship is viewed as a national task. State care for that one child gives women the opportunity to advance their careers.

At the same time, the high social value that Chinese society places on the family institutionalises different roles for women and men. As women are still tied to family roles, there is spill over from this value of family life to the work place (Loscocco and Wang 1992). State oversight helps, but cannot ensure, that women and men receive the same education and are channelled into the same professions (Andors 1983) (Stacey 1983). Institutionally, those jobs
that are considered as part of women’s sphere do not threaten the family system. They involve less management authority, less travel and, usually, shorter and set hours.

For the women and men in our study, the family was a powerful force that shaped their own career choices as young adults. Many women knew little about their majors and felt obliged to follow the paths their parents set forth. Some parents pushed their daughters into a technical fields. Ying Ying recalled that she loved dancing, but was not allowed to study it in college.

When I enrolled in University, my father just selected computer science for me as my major. I didn’t even know what a computer was! He said that computers would be the future. I had little knowledge of technical things then. Luckily, now only computer science majors can find jobs in Beijing. (F, B.Sc. Computer Science)

Still other women were persuaded that engineering and other technical fields were not suitable. This occurred in the case of Liuma, a physician, who was married to Zhu Ji, an electrical engineer. Although Liuma’s parents were both engineers, she studied medicine, which was defined as a female job.

I took science courses in 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 to be a teacher or a doctor. Because I didn’t have much patience, I wouldn’t make a good teacher.

Liuma even decided on her speciality based on her emigration plan, realising she needed to choose a medical speciality that was acceptable abroad. Furthermore, concerned about her
English abilities after emigration, she thought that an anaesthesiologist wouldn’t need to communicate a lot with patients who are already asleep!

I chose to be an anaesthesiologist because, to a large extent, it was easier to change to nursing from an anaesthesiologist. If I wanted to go abroad, it wouldn’t be too hard. So after my graduation, I chose it on purpose, considering the possibility of going abroad. (F, B.Sc. Medicine)

Overall, due to parental guidance, more women than men in our study majored in non-technical subjects such as medicine, education, the humanities, law, business, nursing, and the social sciences.

Although there was considerable educational equality between husbands and wives, most of whom met in university or on the job, marriage began to shift family roles. Taking on greater responsibility for family matters, many wives no longer sought to advance their careers. More men than women (30% vs. 6%) received further training after they had married. For instance, at the time that Liuma was pregnant, Zhu Ji studied for an MBA. Liuma, her mother, and a baby sitter cared for the infant, freeing the husband to turn to a new career. By underwriting their husbands’ further education, the wives’ achievements fell behind. They also nurtured the view that this was as it should be. Women should undertake their family roles first.

Spouses recognised that given the low wage of the state sector, they both had to work, but in most cases gave more weight to the husband’s advancement (McKeen and Bu 2005; Zuo 2003). Many men saw their wives’ work as an unavoidable but necessary part of the family economy. Not all held egalitarian views, and few gave equal time to home chores (Da 2003). They hoped the wife’s work would not interfere with the “second shift,” which Hochschild
Hochschild (1989) identified as the domestic activity that occupies parents before they go to work and after they return.

When their child was born, most of the wives continued to pursue careers. Only 3 wives quit their formal employment entirely to care for their children. Even these 3 were not greatly disadvantaged: they worked from home, using their professional skills in the private market. One mother, alarmed at the slackness of her servant 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.

Although these dual career parents had to find ways to combine family and work, it was not a heavy burden. The women’s careers were acceptable so long as they could also have a family. Moreover, their family roles were chiefly seen as educating the next generation (Salaff et al. 2004). They did few of the tiresome household chores. They earned enough to warrant considerable family help in childcare, could pay servants, or could use full time governmental day care programs as backups (Salaff and Greve 2004). As a result, educated Chinese women became active members of the labour force in their home country.

Nevertheless, the women quietly altered their professional goals. Couples practised a division of labour. Many wives stayed in the regulated state sector, or transferred to more flexible jobs that did not demand long hours and travel in order to care for their children, while their husbands chose the risky private sector (Loscocco and Wang 1992). For instance, a husband and wife that first met in their university engineering course were both assigned to work in the same factory, far from their village homes. They married and started a family. When the husband entered a joint venture in a development zone, his wife followed, but applied to teach at
a new college in the zone. She decided that 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. (F, B.Sc. Mechanical Engineering)

In another example, Liuma, who practised medicine in the state sector, was able to balance work and family roles in an overall, and gendered, manner. She and her husband lived with her parents, both engineers, after marriage, until Liuma’s father, a plant director, arranged a nearby apartment for them. When Liuma had a son, they moved back to her parents’ home to get help. Mother and daughter, both state sector workers, could usually control their hours. In addition, they hired a baby-sitter and the three cared for the child. Liuma recalled that “I never felt the burden of raising a child!”

Even with institutionalised backups, there were compromises. For instance, Jun (F), a dedicated manager and computer programmer in a private company, lived with her husband’s parents. 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 after the birth it seemed I didn’t care about it much. Work was not the focus of my life, taking care of the baby and the family became the focus, instead. And it’s very demanding.

The socialist production system contained counter-currents. It was hard to manage the family economy. Although family roles were honoured, it was hard to get the basic consumer goods.
Families lived in crowded apartments. The paucity of resources that defined urban life throughout the 1960s and 1970s, which was expected to focus professionals on their work rather than consumerism, affected their family relations (Wang 2004). When in the 1990s family owned housing was built, and consumer durables came onto the market, families greeted them eagerly (Davis 2000b). The eager response to greater affluence and new consumerism of the 1990s suggests that the older system submerged the desire of many families for consumer goals, a spatially private family life, and more family time. Many saw emigration as a means to achieve this family space.

These women and men had already completed their schooling, chosen their disciplines, and embarked on high-status careers in China. Nevertheless, while men and women had nearly the same career opportunities, women wove their careers around their family responsibilities. Working families had the wider societal support to balance most of their roles, although women arrived in Canada with fewer transferable resources.

4.2. Migration and Family Roles

When they migrated to Canada, the respondents entered a realm in which family and work institutions were meshed differently from what they had experienced in China. In North America, women’s family roles are highly rewarded, and they are expected to mesh careers with caring for the family. There is little formal support to do so, and solutions are individualised, depending on each family’s efforts. Women frequently take career breaks for family reasons. Yet they can often return to the job status that they left, since the jobs considered suitable for women tend not to have career ladders (Dykstra and Fokkema 2000; Wolf and Rosenfeld 1978).
In the act of migration itself, the female respondents gave up a realm in which they were known and supported for one in which their achievements were questioned or denied, or not enabled. Few of the women were principle applicants for migration. As dependent movers, careers become secondary to those of their husbands, who initiated the emigration process (Chattopadhyay 1997; Halfacree 1995; Lee et al. 2002; Shihadeh 1991; Smits 1999; Yeoh and Khoo 1998). Immigrant women lose many of their crucial overlapping social and domestic networks. Leaving behind parents and other kin affects their family structures. The wife takes on responsibility for domestic and family affairs that other kin previously performed, increasing these tasks (Creese and Dowling 2001; Eastmond 1993; Kay 1988; Loo and Ong nd; Ng 1982; Pe-Pua et al. 1998; Salaff 2002).

Migration has not severed their family relations and families honour kin obligations when they can, remaining the most important support even after this cross ocean move (Boyd 1989; Salaff and Greve 2004). Transnational households extend over space and conduct activities from multiple living places. Chinese maternal or paternal kin try to find ways to assist such households, as they had done in China. Their female seniors arrive as visitors or immigrants, or care for the youngsters in China for substantial periods.

The wife’s career is often placed second to the husband’s for a number of reasons. The husband is identified with the well-being of the family. Wives also may have further to go to re-qualify or return to school. For instance, Chinese physicians, mainly women, take their exams in China in Putonghua, but have to retake them in English. Women have fewer recognised resources than their husbands: more women have worked in state enterprises, and lack job contacts in North America, and also have learned less English. Furthermore, the fields in which they have built careers may not welcome women. Although some try to re-enter their old
lines of work, others retrain. Those who do not have a way to care for their 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, immigrant women combine home-making, reproductive labour, and job preparation. They start petty businesses, take up labouring jobs, become part-time workers or leave the workforce entirely (Salaff and Greve 2003). Lian (F), a former accountant, wove her ESL study with her son’s primary school hours.

How many hours do I study at school? Every day I send my son to school at 8:30, then I go to my school from 9:15 am until 2:45 p.m. When I get home, I study for 10-20 minutes, then I go to pick up my son.

Her day was broken, and her chance of progress was slow until her husband’s parents arrived to help with the family tasks.

We have seen that the female respondents came from an institutional setting that supported their careers. The North American career woman pays for the ability to go to work by stinting on the time and emotional energy to raise a family. The housewife pays by remaining outside social life (Hochschild 1989). Caring for a young family is harder in Canada, when it becomes the responsibility of the parents. Without childcare support in the new location, gender roles may become entrenched (Lee et al. 2002; Willis and Yeoh 2000). Some parents are lucky to get subsidised day care places, or, with both parents working, they find a neighbour who works at home as a care-provider for children. Many import their familiar family support systems. As a by-product, transnational family life encourages new motherhood.
With few rewarding alternatives, their attention turns to their families. Downplayed when they lived in China, family roles are central to how families appear to live in the new consumer world in which they find themselves. Surrounded by North American norms that women should not be career oriented, new immigrants may adapt to what they see as mainstream women’s femininity (Zhou 2000). Clearly, there is an emphasis on putting money and effort into their family roles in ways they had not done in China.

Following the Canadian norm, they put more time into their home setting. Few of the respondents had owned their homes in China. In Canada, the husbands and wives worked hard to earn down-payments; they stinted on purchases and doubled up in small basement flats with other PRC immigrants to save rent. Finally, two thirds became home owners. Two had upgraded their housing so that they could open rooming houses for new immigrants, a form of petty entrepreneurship.

Childbearing is another area where women expand their family roles. Whereas bearing a second child in China was politically damaging for these elite women, in Canada bearing two children was natural. Nine women had a second child after leaving China. One has had her third. More than half (6 of 9) with two children had their daughters first. A second child gave them the chance to meet the long-cherished hope of bearing a son for the family. The new birth turned an aborted career, with confusing prospects, into the respected career of motherhood. None of the mothers with two children had good jobs when they became pregnant the second time. Their families had become their careers.

Rong Jin and his wife Clara are examples of this. When they migrated to Canada in 2000, they knew that they were leaving behind family and a rich network in Beijing. With Chinese
engineering credentials and experiences, Rong and his wife had high aspirations to build a bridge connecting the two countries. Nevertheless, it was hard to find jobs in their field. Rong finally landed a well-paid job as a product engineer, but believed he would never regain a position as group supervisor, and wanted to do something more challenging. Clara was less successful. Once a department director, Clara was not able to use her engineering degree in Canada. She was taking accounting courses in the hope that the degree would be of assistance to a business that she hoped to start with her husband in the future. She also had a second child, which she claimed was her sole accomplishment in Canada.

In another example, Hen Rong (F), a former accountant, and her husband, a former engineer, lived with their teenage daughter. Hen Rong became a textile labourer in Toronto to support her husband while he re-qualified as a computer programmer. After he got a job in a computer firm, Hen Rong remained in the factory. When Hen Rong accidentally became pregnant, her mother and friends pressured her and her husband to keep the second child. “This is your last chance,” her mother admonished her pregnant daughter. Her mother had cared for the couple’s eldest daughter from birth, and they sponsored her to immigrate to help with the new baby. The older woman beamed as she toted the baby boy around.

Parents dedicate themselves to the education of their children (Salaff et al. 2004). Chang Yongdao’s son excelled at mathematics and chemistry, and won prizes in competitions in Shanghai. Mr. Chang thought that he would get a better education abroad. In Canada, the boy took part into academic competitions and has won awards, and was preparing to get into university. Mr. Chang has re-certified as an engineer and has a good job in a firm for which he had worked in China. However, his wife could not regain an accountant’s job, and had to sew
in a factory. Satisfied with her husband and son’s successes, she shifted her attention to the family.

Ju Dan and her husband Zisheng, both with Master degrees, knew going abroad was a challenge, but when both ended up as labourers, the family changed their goals. Zisheng went to graduate school in Montreal, leaving his wife and son in Toronto. Although Ju Dan found it hard as a single parent in Toronto, she wanted her son to improve his English, instead of learning French. She immersed herself in his school activities, bringing over her parents for a period to help.

Xu Qi, an electrical engineer, feared that his daughter could not make headway in China’s tough examination system and that it would be easier for her in Canada. His wife Yan reluctantly agreed, although hesitant to end her promising career at the Shanghai Futures Exchange. This was yet another instance of the wife’s sacrifice. As a clerk in Toronto, she has compensated for her loss of career by having a second child. With a new motherhood role, she turned more time to the family than before. In these and other cases, women who accepted jobs below their experience and training applied their energies to their child’s education.

Kin help in the family sphere can go in two directions. Although kin can do little to help with job searches in Canada, when they take over childcare, wives can retrain. However, gendered job structures enter the equation and limit women’s jobs to what is acceptable in the society. In view of this, many understandably use their kin support to emphasise family roles, to bear and nurture a child. Here, they are consonant with what is extolled in Canada. The trade off for women is made less painful. They have a chance at a new career.
5. CONCLUSION

The institutional framework spotlights arrangements that working parents face in combining labour force activity and family work. On the labour force side, there are differences between Chinese and Canadian career structures, professional labour markets, and gendered employment systems. On the family side, the ideal family roles and structures that provide support for parenting roles also differ. When these structures create barriers that professional and skilled workers face in conducting careers in the new country, they also provide a way out. Institutional arrangements are crucial in turning immigrant women toward new careers and, for some, a new identification with the family.

Chinese women who immigrate to Canada are professionals with degrees and certificates earned abroad, whether with scientific, engineering or humanities-oriented majors. The Canadian institutional structure, dominated by professional bodies, does not recognise international education, professional certification, or experience. What Canadian employers reject can be understood as a feature of the institutionalised labour market. Employers want to hire professionals that have familiar characteristics, which the local professions can accept and certify. Employers are parochial and loath to accept the unfamiliar. Furthermore, as medicine, engineering and other controlled professions require re-certification and Canadian work experience, it is illegal to hire people without such legitimisation. State and federal civic institutional structures do not ease the re-certification process. Immigrants need to afford the time to take courses, get hired in a supervised position, or find an internship. This is hard for large numbers of new immigrants to accomplish, and burdened with families, women have less chance at re-qualifying than men.
Next, institutional theory sees migration as breaking a career path. Careers are institutionalised in local settings. Careers start with a degree, apprenticeship, or certification, followed by jobs that gain more managerial content and higher status over time. These patterns characterise the evolution of a successful professional career. Those with deviant careers are perceived as failures. Migrants who move from one country to another break career paths and suffer as a result of departing from recognisable careers. Furthermore, gendered and racist concepts shape professions. Women are channelled into different fields in the two countries. Many professions that are emphasised as heroic in China are not considered feminine in Canada. Notably, engineering and technical fields, which are popular choices in China, are male identified in North America. Immigrants are slated for lower level technical positions, with only some deemed suitable for women. In Canada, women’s fields are heavily humanistic and arts dominated, and immigrants are unlikely candidates for these cultural positions. Given differences in how the fields are defined, gender roles in China and Canada diverge.

Institutional theory can also explain how families adapt to the new environment. The institutional arrangements for meshing work and the family affect women more. Even in China, male and female career paths diverge. Although women were once in professions that commanded elite status in China, their family roles removed most from a competitive stream, they rarely continued to earn higher degrees after marriage, and had less experience in foreign joint venture companies. They have fewer transferable resources than their husbands.

Family and paid employment are hard to integrate, and the work it takes for women to develop their careers and raise families is institutionalised differently in the two societies. In China, the extended family is part of a support system for sustaining both careers and family life. Our female respondents relied on a web of female helping hands, buttressed by state
policies and structures. In Canada, they were faced with the model woman as mother. This role model reduced career ambitions. When their work roles were not recognised, these women made their careers secondary to their family lives. At the same time, a local support system for childcare was almost absent, and many adapted by using their transnational networks. This ability to extend some of their former institutional structures into Canada helped to widen support for their work or family roles. Many then had a second child.

Chinese who migrate to Canada as skilled workers face poor employment prospects, with women doing worse than men because their occupations are more mismatched to institutionalised gender roles in the new country. Not only are they likely to drop to part-time status, but their new occupations are significantly lower in job status than their previous careers. The institutional framework can expand our understanding of these processes.

6. References


Chinese Immigrant Women


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