



Research paper

Effects of transnational migration on drug use: An ethnographic study of Nepali female heroin users in Hong Kong



Wai-Man Tang*

Anthropology Department, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Background: Past studies of female drug users in South Asia tend to focus on their plights, for instance, how they have been driven to drug use and encounter more problems than their male counterparts, such as HIV/AIDS and sexual abuse. Few studies focus on their active role – how they actively make use of resources in the external environment to construct their desired femininity through drug consumption. Furthermore, little is known about the situation of female South Asian drug users who are living overseas. This paper is a study of transnational migration, drug use and gender – how transnational migration influences the drug use of female transnational migrants.

Methods: An 18-month ethnography has been carried out in a Nepali community in Hong Kong and 13 informants were interviewed. Data were coded and analyzed by using the grounded-theory approach. Themes related to the drug use of the female Nepali heroin users were identified.

Results: The findings show that there are three important themes that significantly affect the drug use of female Nepali heroin users, which include (1) their relationships with intimate partners, (2) their means of support, and (3) their legal status in migration.

Conclusions: The findings are consistent with the concept of post-structuralism in gender and transnationalism theories. Female Nepali heroin users in Hong Kong are neither active agents nor passive victims; their active/passive role is largely dependent on their reconfigured opportunities and constraints in transnational migration. Thus, transnationalism should be taken as an important perspective to study the situation of female drug users in a globalized context.

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Introduction

Linked with the British colonial history in Hong Kong, 63,176 South Asians are residing in Hong Kong according to the 2011 census, which constitutes 0.89% of the population. Among them, a total of 16,518 are Nepalis. Thousands had served in the Gurkha army. After retirement, they brought their family to Hong Kong. According to the Narcotics Division, there were 319 Nepali drug users in Hong Kong in 2012, the largest number among non-Chinese drug users. A survey showed that most are heroin users and descendants of ex-Gurkha soldiers; a small number are women (Tam & Tang, 2011). The situation of South Asian female drug users is rarely studied in drug use studies. They are either ignored due to their small number (Sinha, 2008) or portrayed as victims. For instance, studies that

compared the characteristics of male and female South Asian drug users found that the prevalence of drug use among males is higher than that of females, but female drug users are more likely to suffer more from drug-related diseases, sexual abuse, and HIV/AIDS (e.g. Bal, Mitra, Mallick, Chakraborti, & Sarkar, 2010; Desphande & Nagpal, 1993; Jhingan, Shyangwa, Sharma, Prasad, & Khandelwal, 2003; Praveen et al., 2012; Shah, Altaf, Mujeeb, & Memon, 2004; Sharma & Khandelwal, 2000). This pattern is consistent with the pattern of the earliest drug use studies in other places (Neale, Nettleton, & Pickering, 2014).

While the earliest drug use studies focused on the plights of female drug users, a new post-structuralist gender theory emerged and challenged this early approach. This new theory emphasizes that gender relations are not a fixed system, but open to changes as there are different forms of masculinities and femininities (e.g. hegemonic and subordinate) in a society (Connell, 1987). Therefore, many of the drug use studies that subsequently emerged have shifted their focus and shown that female drug users are not necessarily a homogenous group subject to a single oppressive force (Measham, 2002). Instead, gender interplays with other social

* Present address: Room 407 Humanities Building, New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong. Tel.: +852 3943 7670; fax: +852 2603 5218.

E-mail address: wymant19@gmail.com

variables, such as marital status, class and ethnicity, and induces different drug use experiences for different groups of female drug users (Neale, 2004). Accordingly, evidence shows that the experiences of female drug users are not necessarily significantly different from those of male drug users (e.g. EMCDDA, 2005, 2006; Forsythe & Adams, 2009; Stolberg, 2009). Furthermore, some studies have shown that female drug users are assertive and autonomous individuals who are able to find fault lines within or between external forces to creatively construct their desirable femininity. Their drug consumption is less stigmatizing and possibly compatible with their everyday life, for instance, their roles as a mother in a family and member in a drug-using community (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2005; Measham, 2002).

Studies of female drug users which are consistent with the post-structuralist approach are usually found in the context of North America, Europe and Australia. Comparatively, studies of South Asian female drug users tend to overlook the complex dynamics between gender and other socio-cultural factors. In fact, except for drug studies, much of the literature on South Asian women has shown this complex interaction. For instance, low-caste women in Nepal are found to be resilient in both public and private domains as they are good at utilizing resources in the external environment, like revival of traditions or grasping new economic opportunities in modernization, to exert their resistance (Ahearn, 2001; Cameron, 1995; Holland & Skinner, 1995; Jones & Jones, 1976). These dynamics are not only found in the local population, but also migrants overseas. In transnational migration, opportunities and constraints are reconfigured; identities become more fluid and contingent (Appadurai, 1990; Hannerz, 1989). Depending on the socio-economic status of the female migrants in the home country and host society, type of migration (e.g. marriage, family or forced migration, or migration for work) and legality of migration, individuals would experience different extents of (dis)empowerment in the migration process (Gaetano, 2008; Ghosh, 2009; Hilsdon & Giridharan, 2008; Kitiarsa, 2008; Walsh, Shen, & Willis, 2008). Yet, much of the literature on South Asian migration, particularly on the Nepalis, focuses on male migrants (e.g. Frost, 2004; Uesugi, 2007) or the migrant population as a whole without differentiating gendered differences (e.g. Bohra-Mishra, 2011; Nath, 2006; Pariyar, 2011; Yamanaka, 2000, 2005). Until now, no ethnographic research has explored the interplay between gender, transnational migration, and drug use of South Asian women. By drawing on the concept of post-structuralism in gender and transnationalism theories, this paper investigates the drug use of South Asian women who are living overseas; that is, an analysis that emphasizes the flexibility of gender identity and reconfiguration of opportunities and constraints in migration in relation to the drug use of female drug users.

Methods

The data in this research are derived from 18 months of ethnographic research in a Nepali drug-using community in Hong Kong between 2010 and 2011. The data collection included two stages: (1) semi-structured interviews in the first stage, and (2) participant observations in the second stage. With the help of the Beat Drugs Fund of the Hong Kong Narcotics Division and The Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abuses (SARDA), I met three female Nepali heroin users at a methadone clinic who were willing to be individually interviewed. Through their networks, I met ten other informants and conducted interviews with them. After the interviews, I continued to stay in touch with them and participated in their everyday activities, which lasted for 18 months. On average, I spent 35 h per week in the field to develop rapport with my informants and gain familiarity with the drug scene.

These 13 informants shared some common socio-economic characteristics. All of them were heroin users, young in age (18–35 years old at time of interview), migrated to Hong Kong when they were young (16–21 years old), and received their primary and secondary education in Nepal or India. Yet, they also varied in terms of ethnicity (9 Gurung, 3 Magar, and 1 Limbu), marital status (2 married and 11 unmarried), birth place (2 in Hong Kong and 11 in Nepal), residence in Nepal (4 from Kathmandu, 6 from Pokhara, 2 from Chitwan and 1 from Dharan) and occupation of father (8 served in the British Army, 2 in the Indian Army, 1 in the Singapore Police Force, and 2 were peasants).

In the first stage, I conducted semi-structured interviews with my informants. The questions were based on the lifetime drug use (LDU) Questionnaire developed by Czermak et al. (2005) and the Drug History Questionnaire developed by Sobell, Kwan, and Sobell (1995) which cover individual drug use history from their first drug-taking to their current situation, as well as information about the reasons, location, duration, amount, route of administration, frequency of drug consumption, and use of drug-related services. Before carrying out the interview, I briefed each individual on the aim of the research and ensured that all of the information given would be kept confidential. A consent form was provided upon request. With the completion of the interview, a HK\$50 supermarket coupon was given to each respondent as a token of appreciation. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The data were then entered into a qualitative software package, ATLAS.ti, for systematic coding, and the coding frame was based on the interview topics. From the coding to the writing of this paper, pseudonyms were used for people and places.

In the second stage, I carried out participant observation in a Nepali community. The activities of my informants were usually held in public parks, pubs, food stalls, alleys, and the open space outside methadone clinics. Through daily conversation and observation, I noted the changes that occurred to my informants over time, which supplemented the data that I had collected in the semi-structured interviews. These ethnographic findings were found to be important in many other drug studies (e.g. Bourgois, 1998; Boeri, Gibson, & Harbry, 2009; Small, Kerr, Charette, Schechter, & Spittal, 2006). The collected data were entered into the ATLAS.ti software for systematic coding and new codes were added. Then the data were analyzed by using the grounded-theory approach. By comparing the self-reported data from the interviews and observational data from the participant observation, related themes to the drug use of the female Nepali heroin users were identified. In this paper, three themes are discussed, which include: (1) relationships with intimate partners, (2) economic means of support, and (3) legal status in migration.

Drug use pattern

Heroin No. 4 is the most popular drug in Hong Kong. Yet, there is an indicative trend which suggests that fewer people are using heroin and more are using psychoactive drugs, such as Ketamine and ecstasy. However, this trend does not apply to Nepali drug users in Hong Kong. Heroin No. 4 remains their preferred drug (Tam & Tang, 2011). The majority of my informants ($n = 13$) used cannabis in their first drug-taking experience in Nepal (84.6%). After migrating to Hong Kong, they usually tried different kinds of drugs, which included cough syrup (84.6%), Nitrosun (76.9%), ice (69.2%), ecstasy (53.8%) and Heroin No. 4 (100%), and Heroin No. 4 is always their favorite. When they visited Nepal, they might take Heroin No. 3 (due to unavailability of No. 4; 84.6%) or Tidigestic (38.5%). On an average, the number of drug types that were ever used on a regular basis was 6 and the abstinence-corrected total years of regular use was 6.9. When they used No. 4, they took on average one packet

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