

Singaporeans in China: transnational women elites and the negotiation of gendered identities

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Abstract

The burgeoning literature on transnationalism involving skilled migrants—based largely on the view from the developed world—have generally paid little heed to “elite” women and the reproductive sphere. We argue that women play many roles in elite transnational migration streams and must be given full consideration as part of the “transnational elite.” Attention is given to the way women—both “tied” and “lead” migrants—negotiate gendered identities as they participate in Singapore’s regionalisation process, a state-driven initiative to extend the national economy by leveraging on growth in the region. Empirical material for the paper is mainly based on in-depth interviews with married women who were part of a larger project involving interviews with 150 Singaporeans who had lived, or were living, in China. In examining the movements through transnational space between Singapore and China, it is clear that patriarchal norms continue to shape women’s understandings of their own identities *vis-à-vis* men’s. Singapore women who move as accompanying spouses (the majority) find themselves giving up careers to focus on their domestic role in China (in the absence of access to “suitable” paid domestic service), and are not so much “deskilled” but “re-domesticated”. The exceptional few women who ventured into China as entrepreneurs experienced considerable strain holding together geographically separate spheres of productive and reproductive work across the transnational terrain. Both sets of “stories” alert us to the need to include “elite” women—whether accompanying spouses or independent entrepreneurs—in our understanding of “transnational elites.” This will contribute to the urgent task of ensuring that both productive and reproductive work are valorized in equal measure in conceptualizing transnationalism.

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1. Global cities and gendered transnational elites

In the recent literature on gender and migration in the developed world, migration scholars have pressed for the need to take into account “current realities of increased participation of women in the labour force, their penetration into professional and managerial jobs and changing household arrangements” (Green et al., 1999, p. 77). It has been argued that migration theory must thus consider not only “traditional” households ascribing to the “female homemaker/male breadwinner” model where “his career” takes precedence in intra-household migration decisions, but also “egalitarian” “dual-career households” where “both careers” are

valorized and household tasks are shared (more or less) equally (Boyle et al., 1999, p. 115). While arguments in this vein have usefully challenged notions of the woman moving as a “trailing wife”, a “tied migrant”, a “constrained migrant” or a “secondary migrant” and put paid to assumptions of a “tolerance of domestication” on the part of the wife, the general conclusions seem to be that “even within supposedly dual-career households, migration is still led much less by the demands of the woman’s career than by those of the man” (Halfacree and Boyle, 1999, p. 8).

A range of explanations has emerged to make sense of these observations. The human capital hypothesis, for example, posits that “family migration is motivated by the search for higher *household* (or family) incomes and may entail the female partner undertaking employment sacrifices in order for the family unit to reap the

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post-migration benefits obtained by the male ‘breadwinner’” (Boyle et al., 1999, p. 114). Gender inequalities in the access to and progression within education and the labour market provide the context in which invariably, women’s careers are sacrificed for “the sake of the family”. Other explanations have centred on the critique that it is “a hegemonically masculinist view to evaluate migration primarily through the lens of careers and the labour market when women may be more likely to take into account family commitments, notably the upbringing of children or the care of relatives, and other more ‘grounded’ factors” (Halfacree and Boyle, 1999, p. 11). This has shifted attention from the patriarchal ideologies at work in the labour market and the workplace to the gendered power relations within the household in shaping migration decisions.

The increasing breadth and rigour of studies exploring the relationship between gender and skilled migration, and the way migratory moves are configured in the overlapping but shifting terrain between the household and the workplace, by and large, have focused primarily on western norms and discourses of the developed world. This is unfortunate, as it perpetuates the long-standing divide that constructs the west as the source of skilled migratory flows and, in counterpoint, the non-west as the origin of unskilled streams. While skilled (male) migrants from the west are dignified as “expatriates” once they reach their destination in the non-west (and their “trailing spouses” recoded as “expat wives”) (see for example, Beaverstock’s (2002) work on British expatriates in Singapore), non-western professionals seeking work in the west and their dependents are seldom accorded the status that comes with such nomenclature. Instead, even in recently emerging work on non-western skilled migrants entering the west as professionals (such as engineers or instructional technology specialists), they are referred to as “new immigrant entrepreneurs” (Saxenian, 2000), a term which conjures up connections with the older literature about immigration, settlement and ethnic networks; or require specially-minted terms such as “astronauts,” “astronaut wives” and “parachute kids” (Pe-pua et al., 1996). Both routes classify the non-western skilled migrant as somehow different, and not to be confused with (western) expatriates. In this context, it is not surprising that given multiple marginalisations along the cross-cutting axes of ethnicity, nationality and gender, non-western *women* as “autonomous migrants”, “lead migrants” and “transnational elites” are hardly given any attention in the literature on skilled migration (exceptions include Le Espiritu, 2002; Thang et al., 2002).

Such an absence is particularly troubling in the burgeoning field of research on global city formation as well as the globalising aspirations of “wannabe global cities” (Yeoh, 1999). While an important vein that can be traced in the literature focuses on skilled international

migration as a process contributing to the production of the global city (Salt, 1988; Beaverstock, 1996a,b; Beaverstock and Smith, 1996; Findlay et al., 1996), such work has focused primarily on detailing the construction of a single global labour market for high-waged professional and managerial workers in global cities, and in turn, the significance of the agglomeration of skilled international migrants, what has been called the “transnational capitalist class” (Hannerz, 1993; Sklair, 2001), in extending the reach of global cities.

While such literature is a corrective to more standard accounts which treat global city formation as a disembodied phenomenon focusing on abstract economic forces without a consideration of the global capitalist city as a space of transnational people flows anchored in specific local urban geographies, much of it still remains gender-blind. Skilled international migrants tend to be treated as highly mobile individual male careerists circulating in an intensely fluid world of inter- and intra-firm transfers and career mobility, and discussed as if they are non-gendered beings who do not form part of a household (exceptions include Adler, 1994; Li and Findlay, 1996; Hardill, 1998; Hardill and MacDonald, 1998; Lam et al., 2002). Information on the marital status or families of male migrants is often treated as an irrelevancy for it is generally assumed that the majority of these skilled individuals are singles negotiating the movement across borders as part of charting a career path or for self-development. Unlike the burgeoning literature in the field of unskilled or semi-skilled labour migration which is threaded through by discussions about gender, family, ethnicity and nationality and how these “markers” are drawn into the politics of inclusion and exclusion (see Aguilar, 1996; Findlay et al., 1996; Findlay and Li, 1998; Yeoh and Huang, 2000), the literature on skilled transients as global elites tends to be characterised by an unwarranted silence on issues relating to women, gender relations or family politics. Raghuram (2000, p. 432) makes the same point when she argues that explanations of skilled migration framed by the modernization thesis tend to privilege economic factors behind “brain drain”, “brain gain” and “brain waste”, without recognising that “skills are embodied in gendered human beings who move through gender-selective and gender-discriminatory labour markets, both in the countries of origin and in the countries of destination”. As Kofman (2000, p. 52) further notes in the context of Europe, part of the reason behind the lack of work on gender and skilled migration lies in the narrow focus of research agendas on the “highest echelons of inter-company transfers” which tend to be male-dominated, and the tendency to ignore feminised sectors of the labour market, such as health. It is also often the case that in the global cities literature, women and households are somehow regarded as outside the frame, as “truants from globalised economic webs”,

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