
14. Shifting migrant categories and recast boundaries in China: transnational women in family migration

Chieh Hsu

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent special issue ‘New Modalities of Chinese Migration’ of the journal *International Migration*, scholars indicated that, concomitant with the decade-long diversification of streams, social class backgrounds and mobility patterns among Chinese migrants, Europe has moved on to embrace the presence of student, highly skilled, professional, investment-oriented and entrepreneurial migrants (Thunø and Li, 2020), many of them stemming from China. The country’s rise as a global economic and political (potentially cultural) hegemony provides a critical context in which these new migration modalities are embedded. In this chapter, however, I argue that such contextual shifts of political and economic dynamics in China and Europe (the Western world) have contributed equally to long-standing and extant modes of migration that specifically pertain to Chinese women. Drawing from literature that probes the diversified yet relatively ‘discrete’ modes of migration in which Chinese women are involved, I further apply a new conceptual lens that incorporates a temporal perspective into their experiences. The subtext of these existing studies and my own research on skilled Chinese-speaking female family migrants point to the often-neglected fact that Chinese female migrants may very well transition from one ‘status’ to another while carrying traits that characterise a multiple range of migrant categories. For those entering as students, the possibility of becoming professional migrants or marrying a native upon graduation, hence becoming marriage or family migrants, underscores the ‘continuity’ of and ‘blurred boundaries’ between categories. These transitions are moreover often entangled with gendered connotations—cultural norms that govern campuses, the workplace, intimate relationships and households in the host society—which affect Chinese women’s lived experiences. Whereas a reappraisal of Chinese migrant women’s ‘places’ in this ‘chain of migration’ is offered, I urge additionally a reconsideration of how China’s emergence and established global position interacts with existing imagination of cultural hierarchy that informs the pursuits of opportunities, human capital, social mobility and even happiness realised often through migration.

The chapter is arranged as follows: I begin with a review of Chinese student migration, usually taking place in the earlier stages of the ‘chain of migration’; this is followed by a brief sketch of the gendered implications in the work transition or patterns of professional migration. I then turn to Chinese women’s family and marriage migration, primarily focusing on those who are educated and professional and in interethnic relationships. I tease out specifically the individual-level motives behind this mode of entry. The last section incorporates the gender and temporal perspectives to assess the spectrum of Chinese women’s migratory experiences. I also call for a reconceptualisation of and more research on Chinese women’s

transnational migration in the upcoming era, in which the traditional North–South dynamics and cultural hierarchy are challenged.

2. STUDENT MIGRATION AS A STARTING POINT

Numerous studies have looked into the motivation behind, patterns of and family strategies involved in Chinese overseas student migration (Kajanus, 2015; Lan, 2020; Li et al., 2019; Martin, 2018; Tu and Nehring, 2020; Waters, 2005). Closely linked to a capital accumulation and enhancement logic, scholars have clearly indicated that wealthy and middle-class Chinese parents are predisposed to financially supporting their (likely) only child's advanced studies (Kajanus, 2015; Tu and Nehring, 2020), and adjusting to transnational living arrangements that generally require family dispersal to facilitate such pursuits (Waters, 2005). Yet, pertinent to educated talents' maximisation of the utility of their skills and capital, scholars have in addition examined Chinese students' decision-making with regard to post-graduation career plan and trajectory. In comparison with destinations—such as Australia—with better immigration policy pipelines that aid status transits to skilled employment or permanent residence, the UK is rarely considered a place for long-term settlement by Chinese students (Tu and Nehring, 2020: 49). Nonetheless, aside from established institutional frameworks that regulate students' mobility patterns and talent circulation, the gender factor deserves to be singled out when approaching and understanding newly minted Chinese graduates' transitional planning and processes.

Often, women's career trajectories are ineluctably tied to life stage developments, particularly those of marriage and family formation. Chinese young women, encouraged by their parents to partake in higher education and expand their horizons abroad, are nevertheless subject to context- and location-specific gender discourses back home that prescribe their circumstances, decisions and professional aspirations, notably as the women who are left behind – that is, 'leftover women' (shèngnǚ, 剩女) (Kajanus, 2015) and married women 'following the chicken' (jià jī suí jī, 嫁雞隨雞) (Li and Findlay, 1999) narratives. Hence, despite the cosmopolitan premium they have garnered from overseas experiences and enhanced power positions associated with their changed physical and social locations (Kajanus, 2015: 83; Mahler and Pessar, 2001), female student migrants are merely in a 'zone of suspension' that temporarily removes them from trite life course scripts (Martin, 2018). In the long run, those discourses that pervade Chinese society—where women's age and fertility are ever-present alongside the discussion of their work-related choices and life developments, and their husband's career takes precedence—could still retain their potency for overseas Chinese female students and introduce a 'gendered' layer of concern not met by men.

From another perspective, however, intimate relationship as a route to transfer one's migrant status is also a 'gendered' affair. As Kajanus elucidates, whereas Chinese male student migrants' foreign education bestows them privilege along with obligations, the fervent wish for their female counterparts to find qualified partners is inscribed in the 'Chinese models of kinship and gender' and aligned with women's designated 'social roles' (2015: 168–169). While by no means diminishing or denying that female students' autonomy, renewed value system and goal orientation cultivated during their studies abroad could lead them to detach from traditional gendered expectations, the prospects of a suitable marriage still 'socially' affect women more than men. The 'ideals of hypergamy' (Kajanus, 2015: 169), similarly

become a common notion seemingly reserved for Chinese female student migrants. Along the same vein, Tu and Nehring (2020) have advised that intimate relationships, both co-ethnic and intercultural, can be conceived as another channel to acquire permanent residence or citizenship in the host country. In any case, international scholarship and statistics have afforded us the insight that family migrants are predominantly women (see Chapters 1 and 2 in this book). Considered conjointly, they unequivocally point to the fact that, in the backdrop of post-study status transition, intimate relationships and related deliberations are prone to centre more in female students' experiences and signal a path to transferal less taken up by men.

2.1 The Transition to Professional Migrants

When we turn to the study-to-employment transition, aside from a newly minted graduate's pragmatic calculations going into determining the location that best ameliorates capital conversion, the practical hurdles entail landing the right job contract with an above-average income level in the sector deemed coveted by the government of the host society. This type of governance ultimately differs from that of marriage or family migration, which primarily concerns 'intimate relationships' in the private domain. Whereas it is less justifiable to cap those arriving for family reunification with an annual numeric quota due to its nature, professional migration or the transferal from student to worker status more broadly reflects the orientation of national migration regimes, making it susceptible to the political climate and policy fluctuations. How destination societies conceptualise talents they aim to attract or retain, then, greatly shape international students' intention to transition and their actual transitional trajectory.

Nonetheless, such 'two-step migration' (Hawthorne, 2010) could be a gendered process for Chinese female graduates owing to the potential cleavage between their fields of specialisation and labour market demands. As scholars (Kajanus, 2015; Lan, 2020; Martin, 2018) have emphasised, studying abroad is also in large part a 'self-transformation' project that transcends purely the accumulation of human capital, though a foreign degree does effectively fulfil Chinese parents' expectations. To many Chinese students, it is the 'immersive experience' of combining 'leisure activities' and education in another culture that counts (Lan, 2020) and not necessarily about enrolling in studies that would yield the highest return to education. Yet, viewed in conjunction with female students' lower enrolment rate in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) academic disciplines (Lim et al., 2021) and the high, albeit skewed, demand for work in ICT industries worldwide (Hawthorne, 2010), Chinese female students might experience marginalisation in their job search and fall victim to the gendered occupational segregation ingrained in most labour markets. Their likelihood of adopting the student-to-employment pathway can therefore be severely compromised.

3. FAMILY AND MARRIAGE MIGRATION

Scholars (Guerassimoff, 2006; Ryan, 2002) have urged the recognition of Chinese women's agency in transnationalism and their migratory patterns triggered by commercial ventures and other pursuits, which are theoretically treated by both 'Chinese and Western migration paradigms' as male-dominated (Ryan, 2002). Just as we need to acknowledge that Chinese women are actively initiating and engaging in labour, business, professional and education-oriented migration, I would even contend that women undertake family and marriage migration at

times with no less degree of rigour, circumspection and knowledge of immigration policies before deciding on the entry system best disposed to their circumstances. Furthermore, the underlying factors driving this mode of migration, its strategies and actual practices, are distinctively female phenomena that merit analysis and deciphering. I will nevertheless limit my discussion to marriage or family migration in the context of intercultural relationships for one obvious reason. As numerous studies have demonstrated, women of Chinese ancestry in co-ethnic unions when confronted with migratory decisions are prone to submit to family priorities under patriarchal norms by valuing their husband's career development above that of their own despite outstanding educational or professional qualifications (Cooke, 2007; Man, 2004; Yeoh and Willis, 2005) and by trailing as 'dependants' and staying mobile to safeguard the integrity of the family (Lee et al., 2002; Li and Findlay, 1999; Wei, 2013).¹ Such voluntary decisions to become secondary migrants despite many women's high level of credentials are usually prompted by a sense of spousal duties and the hope to advance their husbands' pursuits, underscoring considerations on the household level. These differ fundamentally, say, from the rationale of some women who 'individually' opt to bypass employment-based entry paths altogether. Not only does family reunification or marriage migration provide a 'comparatively' less cluttered process in women's favour, the lack of mechanisms in the host country to validate women's accreditation and facilitate their gainful employment also act as 'severe deterrence', potentially directing many away from work-related channels. It is thus beyond the constellation of co-ethnic couples and on women's 'personal choices' grounded in cross-cultural gender dynamics that I focus when exploring Chinese women's decision to embark on the journey of family or marriage migration.

While love and romance are easily the go-to explanation that propels family or marriage migration, Constable (2005) has perspicaciously cautioned that, even in the frequently stigmatised form of 'mail-order brides' from Asia, where women are perpetually depicted as passive victims, individuals' strong will to seek various types of 'upward mobility' and much more should be brought to the fore. Scholars (Farrer, 2008; Liu and Liu, 2008) have also dismissed the facile interpretation of viewing Chinese women's transnational marriage as financially motivated. It is essential to take into account that 'cartographies of desire' (Constable, 2003: 28)—namely how global power hierarchy associated with geographic locations produces patterns and imagination of desirable relationships—are also embedded in decisions about cross-cultural intermarriage. In line with hitherto-introduced literature and concentrating on educated or professional Chinese women, studies have alternatively illustrated that interethnic romance and subsequent marriage migration could be spurred by conscious efforts to escape gender ideologies and societal constraints and to embrace new status and lifestyles.

Zurndorfer's (2018) research on transnational romance has revealed that selecting a foreign partner can be the strategic result of unmarried or divorced Chinese women who are ostracised by toxic discourses revolving around their marriageability and age. Reflecting To's (2013) investigation on the 'leftover women' phenomenon, both studies found that lingering traditional views that dictate, judge and discriminate Chinese women's marital choices, co-exist

¹ The irony here is that women are constantly making 'sacrifices' for the 'welfare' of the household. They are the protagonists of 'astronaut families' that relocate with their children for overseas education to accumulate their offspring's human capital, weathering through family dispersal (Waters, 2005). They are also the ones who put their own career on hold to accomplish the endeavours of their husbands, even when they themselves have an equal level of educational attainment.

with the call for women's economic achievements, championed by the classic 'individualisation' thesis of modernity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Yan, 2009). 'Going foreign', then, becomes an effective means to break free and rise above such patriarchal frameworks that regulate their intimate relationships.

The premise of Chinese women marrying foreign men for the purpose of hypergamy is another aspect that deserves scrutiny, particularly given its convoluted relationship with 'upward mobility'. Global hypergamy typically refers to 'marriage mobility' exercised by women in less developed areas or economically disadvantaged situations and their move to affluent and more developed regions in the world (Constable, 2005: 10). As Jeffreys and Pan (2013) have suggested, the majority of Chinese-foreign marriages before 2010 are 'intracultural' unions between Mainland Chinese women and men from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Nonetheless, it is to be noted that the prevalence of more qualified and educated Chinese women marrying older men in less privileged social positions, sidelined by the marriage squeeze in Hong Kong, resembles more the concept of 'spatial hypergamy' (Constable, 2005). Rather than moving up the ladder of socioeconomic status, it is the 'geographic mobility' that promises improved living standards and economic opportunities that captivates and induced these marriages. This notion of 'decoupling hypergamy from pure material gains' learned from cases of 'intracultural' marriages may be further applied when examining Chinese women's 'authentic' international and interethnic marriages.

Often conjuring highly contradictory connotations, intermarriage with Western men in China is simultaneously 'glamorised and vilified' (Hu, 2016: 2). While likely a foreboding of cultural and ideological clashes for Chinese parents, Western men's 'open-mindedness' and non-adherence to male dominance or chauvinism (To, 2013: 10) are exactly the qualities that appeal to achieved and highly educated Chinese women. In other cases, marrying a foreign men can be seen as a springboard to flexible overseas travel, education abroad and even a 'service' to wealthy Chinese women's business ambitions or professional advancement (Liu and Liu, 2008: 258). Meanwhile, Hsu (2020a) cited narratives from skilled Chinese-speaking family migrants married to German husbands, showing that European countries are generally depicted in Chinese societies as fairy-tale lands with castles and mansions (the so-called 'pink bubbles' imagination) and envisaged to be espousing gender-egalitarian attitudes, where patriarchal constraints on women are portrayed as non-existent. Overall, spatial mobility to Europe in the context of intermarriage for Chinese women connotes hypergamy in the sense of an equal partner, a destination with more progressive values and a more carefree, paced and competition-free lifestyle. 'Upward' mobility, then, in the case of professional and skilled Chinese women's intercultural relationship and marriage migration deviates from the quintessential notion of global hypergamy and concerns primarily the opportunity to liberate from conservatism and to lead a less 'restricted' life.

Nevertheless, the incongruities between post-arrival reality and pre-departure illusion should not be understated. On the one hand, just as Western masculinity is homogenised as less domineering, hence desirable among qualified Chinese women, the categorical ascription of tenderness and docility to Asian women is equally hackneyed. Such disparity in false presumptions about culture and gender presages troubles in dyadic interactions, especially when experienced in the country of the husband. On the other hand, scholars (Hsu, 2020a, 2020b; Hu, 2016; Kim, 2011; Zurndorfer, 2018) have stressed that accomplished Chinese women in intermarriages, upon entering family life within Germany and the UK, were startled to find their qualifications devalued and themselves reduced to 'housewifery'. Often compelled to

conform to the host countries' dominant single-male-breadwinner gender norms that permeate not only the private sphere but also institutions such as the welfare system (Hsu, 2020a), they came to realise that their significant others were quick to slither into the traditional division of labour that approximates to patriarchy in China. The lustre of cross-cultural relationships, a symbol of 'cosmopolitan social capital' if set against the background of 'global Shanghai' between an expat and skilled Chinese women (Farrer, 2008: 26), can be immediately lost when transnational settlement occurs.

4. GENDER IN CHINESE WOMEN'S MIGRATION: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Candice Hiu Yan Andrade's (2020: 13) study on young Chinese female migrants who began transnational relationships or formed households during their sojourn as students or holiday workers in the UK accentuates the significance of temporality and the 'complex interplay between intersecting modalities of socially constructed time'. She disclosed that Chinese young women, while choosing to go abroad at a time of their transition to adulthood, are very much regulated by the UK's stipulated duration of stay and minimum period of co-habitation (institutional time frame) and age-sensitive marital expectations for women endorsed by norms and the Chinese state. Intensified by the notion of women's 'biological clock ticking', the juncture of multiple time regimes causes a temporal double-bind and determines young Chinese women's marital decisions and migration trajectories.

In Lee et al.'s (2002) study on Chinese women and their family lives in Britain, they revealed three subgroups who entered as overseas brides, migrated together with their co-ethnic spouses as a household, and move as independents. Whereas their motives of relocation differ, respectively for a better life, for keeping the family intact and for self-fulfilment, what manifested more starkly is their varied situated experiences in the family and with the host society. The once-solo independent migrants, who started families in Britain often after their studies, are the most linguistically proficient, financially secure, socially integrated and resourceful, all lending leverage to negotiating family demands and sidestepping family constraints (e.g., co-habitation with extended families). These insights underscore that, while many Chinese women may share the same status as 'marriage or family migrants', the temporal development of their migratory trajectories differentially forges their gendered experiences in the host country. Moreover, the social fields one is in contact with as a student, a worker and a wife abroad are drastically different. Accordingly, the social positions and the 'gendered expectations' associated with each identity vary. Yet, as Piper and Roces remind us (2003: 7), migrant women's identities 'as workers, wives, mothers, and citizens' are never neatly demarcated, which easily requires the concurrent juggling of roles and reconciling opposing and incompatible expectations as they go through different life stages and status transitions.

A revisit of Chinese women's transnational migration from a chronological perspective has revealed how mobility is constantly tied to individual prospects, status transitions and even selective mating strategies. Most importantly, regardless of their life stage, whether fledgling young women in search of higher degrees, intellectual stimulation and the cosmopolitan experience or more established professionals looking for a viable transition or starting a family, gender discourses at home targeting women (i.e., age-appropriate marriage, leftover women) hardly relinquish their grip. While affirming that spatial mobility creates new 'gender geog-

raphies of power' (Mahler and Pessar, 2001) to some extent, instead of being 'transported' seamlessly to a new hierarchy and social position in the host society, Chinese women are more accurately caught in conflicting, if not outright contradictory, value systems and cultural models as they retain transnational ties and acquaint themselves with destination norms and customs.

As Andrade's (2020: 3) article illuminated, the broader mobility patterns among Chinese youths cannot be detached from the 'historical time of unprecedented economic development' in China. Liu and Liu (2008: 256) also pointed out that political and economic factors of both China and destination societies have collectively contributed to the "'leave-the-country fever'" (chū guó rè, 出國熱) through transnational marriage'. Yet, at a time when international hierarchy is much altered and China's hegemonic position in the global economic and political order much cemented, it is only apt to revisit the situation and deliberate as to whether this logic still holds true when reappraising the modalities of Chinese women's migration.

A few critical questions that may guide future research are whether student-to-professional migrant worker transition is still desired given China's economic prosperity, whether intercultural marriage between Chinese women and Western men is continually regarded as an escape or route to some form of 'hypergamy' or 'upward mobility', and whether the look to 'the West' as superior destinations that proffer accreditation, cultural cultivation and progressive values is at all challenged by China's rising eminence. As Thunø and Li (2020: 15) cautioned, Chinese migration to Europe has long surpassed an 'outdated' South to North mobility path and should rather be viewed 'in the context of a highly globalised and economically powerful "home country" and European "receiving countries" in economic and political distress'. China with its stellar 'mid'- or 'post'-pandemic economic rebound and solid consumer power in particular has 'reaffirmed' itself as a much sought-after market and destination in the eyes of its Western counterparts. Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese, too, are likely to be acutely aware of how the tables have turned when it comes to the forces China projects. Furthermore, individual decisions to move and cross borders in a circular fashion have also been mired in or instructed by state-administered or state-orchestrated national strategies that aim to conceive 'China's transnational diaspora as a crucial human geopolitical asset' (Thunø and Li, 2020: 6). Simply put, it is no longer a unidirectional aspiration of upward social mobility that defines movement from China to Europe.

This view when applied to marriage migration and intimate relationships is particularly crucial as it adds texture to gender dynamics encapsulated within intercultural unions. From geographical/spatial hypergamy to the stereotypical image of docile, subservient Asian women married to European Caucasian men (Constable, 2005), typical South to North intermarriages are accompanied by power imbalances as a result of putative notions about race/ethnicity, gender, and geographical and developmental order. Even the finding of 'leftover women' seeking foreign men as partners who are assumed to espouse more egalitarian attitudes hints at the European continent's liberal or cultural 'superiority' and European men's latent racial privilege, jointly conjuring a dual allure for women situated in Asia. Nonetheless, as argued, China's ascent in cultural, economic and political dominance inevitably confronts this script. When the global order is flux and cultural hierarchy also in reshuffle, we need to take into account 'the hybridity of old and new ideals' not just within China, as Zurndorfer laid bare (2018: 501), but rather on a global scale to truly grasp the motivations and patterns of Chinese women's transnational movements.

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