Gender, work and migration: Deskilling Chinese immigrant women in Canada

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Synopsis

The Chinese have constituted the largest immigrant group entering Canada since 1987. This paper focuses on the paid work experience of Chinese immigrant women from Hong Kong and Mainland China who were highly educated, skilled professionals in their home country. It demonstrates that these immigrant women are being deskilled in Canada and this deskilling is complicated by the contradictory processes of globalization and economic restructuring, with its polarizing effects along axis of gender, race, ethnicity, class and citizenship. Gendered and racialized institutional processes in the form of state policies and practices, professional accreditation systems, employers’ requirement for “Canadian experience” and labor market conditions marginalize Chinese immigrant women. As a result, they are being channeled into menial, part-time, insecure positions or becoming unemployed. In order for Chinese immigrant women to become equal and active participants in Canadian society the provision of inclusive programs and policies is necessary.

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Introduction

The new Canadian Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), which replaces the Immigration Act of 1976, was implemented on June 28, 2002. In introducing the new Act Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s primary strategic objective is to ensure that “immigration results in the greatest possible economic and social benefits for Canada” (CIC, 2002a). Accordingly, the state carries out many activities to achieve those goals, the first of which is the selective admission of permanent residents who are skilled workers, investors and entrepreneurs, i.e. immigrants who are most eligible to contribute to Canada’s economic, cultural and social growth. For the skilled worker category, the new Act maintains the system by which immigrants are chosen for their skills, but sets higher criteria with regard to education, knowledge of official languages, work experience, age, arranged employment in Canada and adaptability. Thus the new immigration policy directly links the recruitment of immigrants with human capital with its goal of accomplishing “competitive advantage” (Bergeria, 1999) in an era of economic globalization.

The prioritizing of highly educated, skilled immigrants and business personnel has historically been the objective of the Canadian state, especially since 1967, when the purportedly “non-discriminatory”¹ points

¹ For a critique of the point system, see Man (1998).
system was introduced into Canadian immigration policy. With the intensification of economic globalization since the early 1980s and Canada’s participation in Canada–U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Canadian neoliberal state underwent rapid economic restructuring, downsizing, privatization and deregulation in order to achieve the goal of being a “lean state” (Shields & Evans, 1998). Concomitantly, the state developed new immigration initiatives to prioritize the highly skilled as well as business immigrants to Canada. Obviously, Canada is not the only country pursuing policy changes to procure highly skilled immigrants, other post-industrial nations (notably the United States and Australia) too have undergone similar policy transformations (Boyd, 2001; Cornelius, Espenshade, & Salehyan, 2001; Fincher, Foster, Giles, & Preston, 1994). The selective immigration policy and the targeting of skilled immigrants has been contentious. On the one hand, the state’s assumption behind the new initiatives is that highly skilled jobs are in demand in the new economic order (Shields, 1995). The strategy therefore is to bolster Canada’s competitiveness in the global market place with a skilled, fluid and flexible labor force that would provide Canada with a “comparative advantage” (Brecher & Costello, 1994) in the post-industrial era of global competition. In such a political and economic climate, it is expected that “skilled” immigrant workers, unlike their “unskilled” counterparts, would enjoy a smooth transition in reinserting themselves in the Canadian labor market. On the other hand, there is growing concern that the selective policies will exacerbate the differential and negative impact on women, particularly poor women and women of color (Arat-Koc, 1999).

Feminist scholars have long drawn attention to the plight of immigrant women, particularly working class and refugee women in Canada (e.g. Arat-Koc, 1999; Giles & Preston, 2003; Ng, 1993). In recent years, a number of studies have addressed the impact of neoliberal policies on women in general (Armstrong, 1996; Brodie, 1995; Luxton & Reiter, 1997), and on immigrant women of color in particular (Das Gupta, 1999; Lee, 1999). These studies shed light on the experience of the multiple oppressions of working class immigrant women. More recently, there is an emerging literature on immigrant women who are highly educated, skilled professionals (Iredale, 2001; Man, 1995, 1997, 2002; Mojab, 1999; Preston & Man, 1999; Salaff, 1997, 2000). These studies found that many middle-class immigrant women too encountered difficulties in finding employment commensurate with their qualifications in the new country.

Since 1987, the Chinese have constituted the largest immigrant group entering Canada. As a result of the increasing emphasis on recruiting skilled professionals to Canada, a high percentage of recent immigrants who are admitted come under this category. For example, in 2000, economic immigrants (comprising of business immigrants as well as skilled workers) constituted 58% of all immigrants coming to Canada. In 1997, 59% of immigrant from China and 53% of those from Hong Kong were skilled workers. By 2000, the skilled immigrants from China had climbed to 75%, while those from Hong Kong had dwindled to 30%.2 The decline in Hong Kong immigrants may be partially ascribed to the negative image of Canada, particularly news of unemployment and underemployment in Canada that Hong Kong residents receive from their friends and relatives.3

In the last decade, much media attention had been paid to the wealthiest Hong Kong business immigrants (Man, 1995), thereby creating a distorted and stereotypical image of Chinese immigrants and exacerbating racial tension. As a Chinese “immigrant” woman academic living in Canada, I am aware of differences among Chinese immigrants and in this paper I only focus on the employment experience in Canada of middle-class Chinese immigrant women who were highly educated, skilled professionals in their home country. I argue that contrary to the state’s assertion that the new economy requires highly skilled labor, these skilled Chinese immigrant women in the paid labor market do not fare well in the context of a new political and economic environment. This article demonstrates that immigrant women’s employment experience in Canada is complicated by gendered and racialized institutional processes in the form of state policies and practices, professional accreditation

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2 See “Immigration by Class: Family, Business, Skilled Worker, Refugees and Others: Top Asian Countries. Available at www.asiapacificresearch.ca/stats/people/Pi2percent.cfm).
3 Preliminary focus group data of the study “Transnational Citizenship and Social Cohesion: Recent Immigrants from Hong Kong to Canada” by Audrey Kobayashi, David Ley, Guida Man, Valerie Preston and Myer Siemiatycki does confirm this hypothesis.
systems, employers’ requirement for “Canadian experience” and labor market conditions. The demands on immigrant women’s reproductive labor in the home also affect these women but I will not address this here (but see Salaff & Greve, 2004).

In using the term “immigrant” women, I am not referring to the legal, technical notion of the word (i.e., someone who is legally not a Canadian citizen). Rather, I am employing the common sense usage of the word to refer to people who are seen as immigrants by others, regardless of their formal legal status.

Iredale (2001) defines skilled workers as those who have university degrees and/or extensive experiences in various fields. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2002a, 2002b, 2003) has a more operative definition. To be eligible to immigrate as a skilled migrant, the new immigration regulations emphasize education, English or French language abilities and work experience involving certain skills, rather than specific occupations. Applicants need to score a minimum of 75 out of a possible 100 points to qualify. They also have to have at least one year of experience working in an occupation in specified skill categories described in the National Occupational Classification developed by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). For the purpose of this paper, I have adopted Raghuram’s (2000) definition of skilled workers as “those with some tertiary education and in possession of skills valued in the labor market”, and with full cognizance of the role of skill as “mediated by the unequal distribution of power along the lines of gender, class, race, language, ethnicity, national origin and the state of the economy” (Mojab, 2000, p. 33).

This paper is informed by the notion that race, gender and class are socially constructed relations that are integral to the formation of contemporary social life (Ng, 1993). Race, gender and class are not distinct, unitary entities that operate separately but must be conceptualized as intersecting, fluid and dynamic and subject to temporal and spatial fluctuations. Thus they appear in divergent forms in different social and historical periods.

Neoliberal restructuring

Since the 1980s, in Canada as elsewhere, the Keynesian welfare state has been drastically eroded and replaced by the neoliberal state that valorizes the private over the public (Jessop, 1993). The dominant discourse argues for the natural and the inevitability of the mechanisms of globalization, structural adjustment, privatization and deregulations, thereby closing off challenges and debates for possible alternative strategies and action. Feminist scholars have asserted that restructuring is a gendered process since social welfare programs and policies affect women’s material conditions and shape gender relationships (Armstrong, 1996; Bakker, 1996; Brodie, 1995; Luxton & Reiter, 1997). Previously state-subsidized programs are being downsized or privatized and people in need of treatment are being deinstitutionalized. The work of healthcare, childcare and elderly care is being pushed back into the home and downloaded onto the unpaid work of women who are expected to be the primary caregivers due to their gender. Moreover, “as services and responsibilities are shifted from the public to the private, they become differently encoded, constructed and regulated” (Brodie, 1995, p. 54). Given the over-representation of women as users of social and community services, as welfare recipients and as employees in the public sector (e.g. social workers, childcare workers, nurses, etc.), government downloading and budget cuts to these services and programs affect them much more drastically. As a result, many women are forced to leave the paid labor force or settle for low-paying part-time employment to meet these caring needs. Many women lose their jobs, or are being deskilled in a leaner and meaner work environment (Armstrong, 1996). Those women who seek employment are being channeled into the private sector as part-time, flexible labor, with no benefits or job security.

Neoliberal restructuring has also served to marginalize immigrants (Shields, 2002). The dismantling of social support programs and the fostering of highly bifurcated labor markets undermine immigrants’ ability to successfully integrate into their host society. As a result, this segment of the population becomes highly susceptible to the problems of social exclusion. In the new labor market, immigrants, and in particular immigrant women of color, are increasingly being used as “flexible” and disposable labor, suited to the demands of the globalized economy (De Wolff, 2003; Vosko, Zukewich, & Cranford, 2003).
Chinese immigrant women in Canada

Migration from Hong Kong to Canada has been increasing since the introduction of the “point” system in 1967. Migration escalated rapidly in the 1980s, so much so that by 1987, Hong Kong became the number one source country for immigrants to Canada and remained so until 1997 (see Employment and Immigration Canada, 1987–93; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1994–2003). The mass exodus of people from Hong Kong was prompted by the uncertainties arising from the reversion of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

The exodus of Hong Kong people coincided with changes in immigration policies in countries such as Canada, Australia and later on the United States. These neoliberal states were eager to recruit immigrants with human capital and economic assets to revitalize their economies and to bolster their competitiveness in the global market. In Canada, new procedures in the business immigration programme designed to attract highly qualified entrepreneurs were adopted in January 1984. In January 1986, the investor component was introduced to further attract eligible immigrants with surplus money for investments (see Borowski & Nash, 1994). These initiatives did not privilege women since only 10.7% of entrepreneur immigrants in 1984 and 12.7% in 1986/87 were women.4

Immigration from Hong Kong started to dwindle in the post-1997 period as a result of the seemingly smooth transition of power from British to Chinese sovereignty which increased the confidence in political stability of Hong Kong among its people. Furthermore, the unemployment and underemployment of many Hong Kong immigrants in Canada has prompted a stream of returned migration. Since the 1990s, the number of Chinese immigrants from Mainland China has been increasing steadily and they now form the single largest group of immigrants coming to Canada (CIC, 1999). Many of the new immigrants are highly educated professionals in their home country and come to Canada under the “other independent” class as skilled workers and professionals.

It is worth noting here that for an “independent class” (including skilled workers, entrepreneurs, investors and self-employed) immigrant, she can enter Canada either as a principal applicant, or as a dependent. The difference between a principal applicant and a dependent is that specific selection criteria are used to assess a principal applicant, but not her/his dependent(s). It is therefore important that the most eligible member of the family (i.e. the person who is likely to accumulate the most points) apply as a principal applicant and designate the other family members as dependents. Within a family unit, the wife and children are likely to immigrate as dependents.

Despite their high education and training many Chinese immigrant women professionals in my study did not enter Canada under the “skilled worker” category. Rather, they entered as dependents of their husbands who are the principal applicants under the economic class category. This is so because “skill” is “constructed and negotiated through ideological and political processes” (Arat-Koc, 1999, p. 284). Gender biases in definitions of education, work and skill means that women’s skills and personal qualities are either excluded or undervalued. Hence the immigration processes reproduce and structure inequality within in the family by rendering one spouse (typically the wife) legally dependent on the other (Ng, 1993). This gender differentiation in immigration status (principal applicant versus dependents) indicates the structural difference between male and female immigrations with regard to their occupation and status in their home country as well as in Canada.

Methodology

In my research on Chinese women from Hong Kong and Mainland China, I have placed women as the subject of the inquiry (Ng, 1993) and linked their accounts to the larger social, economic and political processes in society in which their experiences are embedded. Instead of starting with preconceived notions, hypotheses or theories originating in the discourse and using the everyday world of experience as a resource to support the sociological discourse, the “standpoint of women” shifts the sociological problematic from the discourse to the everyday world. This methodology has enabled me to investigate how individual Chinese immigrant women as subjects
account for their situations and to demonstrate how their subjective experiences articulate with larger social, economic and political relations.

The Chinese come from diverse social, cultural, economic, political, sexual locations and different geographical sites and they speak various dialects. They are therefore not a homogeneous group. Moreover, the Hong Kong Chinese differ from those from Mainland China as they have lived in different social, political and economic systems. While Hong Kong immigrants have lived in a capitalist system under colonial rule for 99 years, people from Mainland China have lived under a communist regime. In general, the HK women are more affluent and had personal assets prior to immigrating to Canada in comparison to their counterparts from China. But the immigration policy selects only the highly educated and “skilled” professionals, ensuring that those Chinese who are admitted are from middle-class backgrounds, regardless of whether they are from China, Hong Kong, or other countries. Other discriminatory measures such as employer’s requirement of “Canadian experience”, the lack of recognition of foreign degrees and the laborious process of recertification of foreign professional degrees also have a homogenizing effect on the new immigrants, rendering obsolete the previous experiences of immigrants in their home countries. In the rest of the paper I will demonstrate how institutional policies and practices have exacerbated the difficulties facing new Chinese immigrant women, transforming their skills into flexible labor, changing their everyday experience in the new country and subjugating them to unequal treatment in the labor market and in the home.

The sample

The research data for the immigrant women from China is derived from focus group and individual interviews with 20 women who have immigrated to Canada between 1994 and 1999. The data for the immigrant women from Hong Kong has been generated through in depth interviews with thirty women who have immigrated to Canada with their families between 1986 and 1993. Five were living in Vancouver at the time of the interview and the rest were living in Toronto. For the purpose of clarity, for the rest of the paper, I will refer to the immigrant women from Hong Kong as HK women and the women from Mainland China as Mainland women. I have artificially delineated women’s work into the spheres of paid work and household work for investigative purposes although in actuality, these two spheres are very much interrelated.

Paid work

Institutional and labor market processes

Chinese immigrant women’s employment opportunities are predicated on labor market conditions as well as gendered and racialized institutional processes. Institutional processes here refer to those policies and practices embedded in government, law, education and professional systems. Such processes can engender and perpetuate social injustice in our society.

Although almost all the women I interviewed had come in as dependents of their husbands, many are highly educated, particularly, the Mainland women. Of this group, one has a masters degree, 15 have bachelors degrees and four have tertiary diplomas. Amongst the HK women, one has a masters degree, nine have bachelors degree, eight have diplomas, two have some post-secondary education and the rest have high school education. The higher education of the Mainland women could be attributed to the fact that the Mainland women came to Canada more recently than the HK women and were therefore subjected to even more stringent requirements by the immigration criterion. While 15 of the 30 HK women worked in professional/administrative positions or quasi-professional positions in their home country, all 20 of the Mainland women had worked as professionals prior to emigration in fields such as research, teaching, engineering, medicine, computer science, accounting, business and administration. At the time of the interviews, however, only three Mainland women were employed in professional positions none of whom had children. Of the rest, five were marginally employed and 11 were unemployed. Among the HK women, three were employed in similar fields prior to emigration, two had managerial/supervisory positions and the rest either worked in clerical positions, were self-employed or ran their own or their husband’s small business. A large number of them were housewives (8). Only three declared themselves as unemployed.
Within a household, the decision to emigrate necessitates that the family pool their resources. In all patriarchal societies, male education and skills are assigned more value than female education and skills. In order to maximize their opportunity for immigration admission, male family members are often designated as the principal applicant. As a result, the majority of these women came to Canada under the family immigrant status as dependents of their husbands, who are the principal applicants. The gendering of principal and non-principal applicants has far reaching consequences. As dependents, the women are treated as being “not destined for the labor market” due to institutionalized racist and sexist practices embedded in the immigration process. In fact, women in China have always participated alongside their male counterparts in productive processes (Association for the Advancement of Feminism, 1993).

While feminists have made some inroads in improving the working conditions of women, gender and racial discriminatory practices in employment continue to be prevalent (Kerr, 1996). The downward leveling effect of restructuring, privatization and deregulation has aggravated labor market conditions by lowering wages and fostering part-time, insecure, contingent employment. This has a polarizing effect along gender, race, ethnicity and class lines. Predictably, immigrant women’s employment has been adversely affected. Numerous studies have found that immigrant women and racialized groups now face greater challenges in getting established in the job market and are increasingly located in disproportionate numbers in low-wage, contingent forms of employment especially in service, sales and production jobs (Badets & Howatson-Leo, 2000; Smith & Jackson, 2002). Minority women and immigrant women of color, in particular, have a propensity to be channeled into “secondary” employment and they tend to stay in it through their working careers (Hiebert, 1997). Previous studies have also found that immigrant women have higher unemployment rates than Canadian-born women (Badets & Howatson-Leo, 2000; Boyd, 1992).

As neoliberal restructuring programs intensify, we see a drastic reduction of immigrants’ earning power. In 1980, both male and female immigrant groups had earnings above the Canadian average, a reflection of the generally higher education levels of the immigrant population but by 1996, these figures had fallen significantly below average. Female immigrant economic principal applicant earnings dropped from around $21,000 in 1980 to about $16,000 in 1996 in comparison with Canadian female average earnings which increased from just under $19,000 to nearly $21,000. Male immigrant economic principal applicant earnings also tumbled from $40,000 in 1980 to $25,000 in 1996, while Canadian male average earnings remained virtually unchanged at just under $35,000 per year in 1999 (Grant & Thompson, 2000, p. 5).

In the last decade, the labor force participation of immigrant women in Canada has also fallen and is much lower than that of either Canadian-born people or immigrant men. According to Statistics Canada, between 1986 and 1996 employment rates for immigrant men aged between 25 and 44 fell from 81% to 71%, while that of immigrant women of the same age group fell from 58% to 51%. In the same period employment rates for Canadian-born women however rose 8% to 73% (Badets & Howatson-Leo, 1999) even though immigrant women generally have higher educational attainments than their Canadian-born counterparts. For example, Badets and Howatson-Leo’s (1999) study found that recent immigrant women and men are more likely than their Canadian-born counterparts to have completed university education (31% and 36% versus 18% and 20%). Yet this does not improve their chances of employment in Canada, particularly in professional positions (Man, 2001; 2002; Mojab, 1999; Travato & Grindstaff, 1986).

The devaluation of international credentials and experience has been seen by some as rooted in the nature of capitalism (Mojab, 2000; Shields, 1996). Regardless of education and experience, immigrants are treated as a source of cheap labor and relegated to low paid, menial positions. These positions are often precarious, with part-time, flexible hours and no security or benefits and employment in these sectors is a highly gendered and racialized phenomenon (Cranford & Vosko, 2003; De Wolff, 2003; Galabuzi,

5 Precarious employment refers to “those forms of work involving atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job security, low job tenure, low wages and high risks of ill health” (Vosko et al., 2003).
Li (2000) contends that the central issue is not so much a problem of individual employer decisions but of labor market discrimination. Institutionalized racist and sexist processes in the labor market discriminate against immigrants in general, and immigrant women in particular, making it very difficult for them to find employment commensurate with their credentials.

The employment opportunities for immigrant women of color in a gender segregated, racialized and globalized labor market are even more seriously jeopardized. Boyd (1992) found that being foreign-born, a member of a visible minority group or female has a cumulative effect such that foreign-born women of color received the lowest wages and salaries of all workers. Immigrant women from developing countries, who do not have English or French language skills, or the “appropriate” educational background, are prone to being ghettoized in low-paid menial labor (Das Gupta, 1996; Ng, 1993).

Previous studies have found that despite their education and skills, the employment experiences of Chinese immigrant women were marred by difficulties (Man, 1995, 1997, 2002; Preston & Man, 1999). Similarly, the 1996 census data reveal that with regard to education, although a higher percentage (17.5%) of Chinese immigrant women (foreign-born) have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher as compared to “other Canadians”, both female and male (12.2% and 14%, respectively). However, fewer Chinese immigrant women have been able to enter the highly coveted managerial and professional occupations (3.7% and 8.5%, respectively) as compared to “other Canadian” women (3.8% and 9.8%, respectively) and “other Canadian” men (8.3% and 9.3%, respectively; Man, 2003, p. 225, Tables 10.3 and 10.4).

Comparisons between the 1986 census data (i.e., the early period of neoliberal policies) and 1996 census data (when neoliberal policies have become well entrenched) on education and occupation of Chinese immigrant women (foreign born) is even more revealing. In 1996 a much higher percentage of Chinese immigrant women have a university degree as compared to 1986 (17.5% and 12.8%, respectively), yet the opportunity for Chinese immigrant women to enter professional, semi-professional and technician positions is only slightly higher than in 1996 (10.4% and 9.9%, respectively; Man, 2003, p. 225, Tables 10.3 and 10.4).

**Chinese immigrant women’s employment experience**

When asked about their employment experience, the women in my studies echoed the difficulties that other immigrant women of color have voiced, i.e. those posed by requirement of “Canadian experience”, by employers’ reluctance to recognize immigrant women’s qualifications and experience from their own countries and by racism in the labor market (George, 1998; Man, 1997). Several HK women became so exasperated with their job search that they gave up the idea of entering the labor force altogether. Their material conditions afforded them the choice of becoming full-time homemakers and taking care of their children, although they were unhappy with this situation. A HK woman who was a former administrator told me, “I have always worked my whole life. I enjoy working. I’m not old, I don’t like sitting home and do nothing…” Both the HK women and the Mainland women spoke of the monetary and emotional reasons for the need to find employment as soon as possible, particularly among the Mainland women. Although most of the HK women have brought money with them, they feared they would soon deplete their savings. They also said that they did not want to be dependent on their husbands financially and that they needed a paid job to feel fulfilled. A HK woman reflected on her job search experience, “It’s a catch-22. I cannot get a job because I don’t have Canadian experience, and yet I don’t see how I can possibly get Canadian experience without being hired in the first place!”

Another HK woman who was a social worker prior to entering Canada became self-employed after several months of being rejected by employers due to her lack of “Canadian experience” and her “foreign” degree. She contends that it was a rationale used by employers to discriminate against internationally trained immigrant women and men. Pursuing recertification involves applying for an evaluation of her social work credentials, doing course work and accumulating at least two years of field practice.6 Few immigrant women can afford to forgo wage work to pursue such an expensive and time-consuming pro-

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6 See CASW/ACTS “Assessment of Foreign Trained Social Worker’s Degree” www.casw-acts.ca/swassessment_e.htm.
cess. Thus, the accreditation process deters immigrant women from practicing their professions.

The lack of recognition of immigrants’ previous credential and work experience is a serious problem confronting highly educated immigrant women who are professionals (Raghuram & Kofman, 2002). In Canada, trades and professions are regulated through the governing and licensing bodies of professional associations such as the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, Canadian Council of Professional Engineers and the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work. In turn, each association has its provincial licensing bodies such as the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons, Professional Engineers of Ontario (PEO), Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). Currently, there are about 35 registered professions in Ontario (Skills for Change, 2001). The re-certification process is often costly and time consuming. There is a prolonged waiting period, and information regarding re-certification is not easily available, and often couched in vague language. It is difficult for new immigrants to navigate the bureaucratic red tape.7

It has been argued that professional associations and licensing bodies function as “labor market shelters” to protect and reduce competition for those already licensed by placing entry restrictions into higher-status and better paying occupations and professions (Boyd, 2000; Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 2000). The professional licensing bodies have complete autonomy in their decision-making process and are ultimately responsible for determining the criteria for immigrants’ re-entry into professions. Since many regulatory bodies have a legislated mandate for “protecting the public good”, they are also in a position to “define characteristics of occupational internal labor markets which create monopolies on products and/or services by controlling labor supply” (Boyd, 2000, p. 4). Issues such as lack of standard assessment process, lack of knowledge of comparative education systems and arbitrary decisions without recourse to an appeal process limit the participation of immigrants in the labor force (Skills for Change, 1995, p. 27).

Immigrant women who were teachers in Hong Kong and China, in particular, found that their teaching experience and qualifications from their home countries are not recognized in Canada. In some cases, re-certification meant having to go through a minimum of one or two years of retraining. In other cases, they have to go through undergraduate education again in order to be accepted into Teacher’s college. One HK woman explained why she has decided against retraining:

I worked as an elementary teacher in Hong Kong for 30 years. The certification system there is different. I got my teaching certificate from the teachers’ college in Hong Kong, that’s it. Here, I have to be recertified again… At my age, I don’t think I can go through another few years of schooling and still have no guarantee of getting a job later.

Since many of the Mainland women needed to make a living right away, they recognized the necessity of acquiring “Canadian experience”, and took whatever jobs they were able to find. The economic downturn in Canada in recent years means that new immigrants looking for work found jobs in low-pay, entry level positions, which do not utilize their skills, education, or experience. Unfortunately, the women often found that this first job experience eventually situated them in the labor market (Ng, 1993). The long working hours and the demands of their household responsibilities meant that some women were unable to retrain or attend English language courses and so found themselves unable to extricate themselves from the menial positions they are ghettoized into. A Mainland woman who was a teacher in Beijing and who became a hotel cleaner in Canada exemplifies their experiences:

The first job I had was babysitting, that was 1 month after I arrived. I found this job from a newspaper. My husband helped me prepare the interview. At that time, I knew very little English, but the woman hired me because she thought I have a good heart and would be kind to her children. I was very happy to get this job… I worked there for over 1 year. I have very good relationship with that family. Now I work in a hotel.

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7 Interview with Shauna Paull, Coordinator, Immigrating Women in Science (IWIS).
as a cleaner, full-time. It’s hard work. My English is not good, I want to improve it, so I attended English classes in the evening at first while I was working during the day. But I couldn’t keep doing so as I felt too tired. I couldn’t concentrate on my study, so I have to give it up.

Feminist activists have protested against gendered policies, which discriminate against immigrant women’s opportunities to learn English. Prior to 1974, Employment and Immigration Canada offered a full-time language-training program known as the National Language Training Program (NLTP). It provided language training with a living allowance (a subsidy) to immigrants who were “heads of households”, who are typically immigrant men (Arat-Koc, 1999; Boyd, 1992). Immigrant women were not eligible for it, nor could they afford to forgo wage work in order to learn English. After 1974, the NLTP program was designated for those “destined for the labor market”. Since immigrant women typically came in as dependents of their husbands they were therefore not considered as “destined for the labor market” and so deemed ineligible for the language course. Furthermore, due to racial discriminatory practices, immigrants of color were often placed in part-time programs in community centers and local schools, while Northern Europeans were over-represented in NLTP at community colleges (Doherty, 1992).

In 1992, two programs were introduced to replace the NLTP. These are: Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) to provide basic communication skills; and Labor Market Language Training (LMLT) for advanced language training targeting those whose labor market skills are in demand. Unfortunately, to reduce cost, the state also eliminated the living allowance and restricted both programs to new immigrants who have been in Canada for less than a year. The elimination of a living allowance discriminates against the most disadvantaged immigrants who cannot afford to forgo wage work to attend language classes full-time. It is in this way that race, gender and class inequalities in Canadian society are reproduced and perpetuated.

In recent years, as a cost saving measure, LMLT, together with two other employment insurance (EI) programs (Severely Employment Disadvantaged (SED) and Project Based Training (PBT)) that drew heavily on an immigrant clientele has also been eliminated. Daycare support too has been cut so that now a mother of two children is excluded from training because the childcare costs are deemed to be too expensive. Therefore, eligibility for training support is no longer universally accessible. Only those individuals who qualify for EI benefits are now granted access to EI funded training programs. Many immigrants and refugees who were not able to obtain a long-term appointment to fulfil the employment insurance requirements are consequently automatically excluded (Whittleton, 1999, pp. 3–4).

Without appropriate language training support, the Chinese immigrant women felt that their inadequate command of the English language specific to their professions (e.g. in engineering, accounting, medicine, etc.) posed a barrier to employment. At the same time, most of the women found the Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) programme too elementary, as it did not help them in gaining the vocabulary they needed in finding employment commensurate with their qualifications.

As a result of all these factors there is a high level of unemployment or underemployment amongst Chinese immigrant women (see e.g. Man, 1997, 2002; Preston & Man, 1999). When they do find employment, they are often overqualified. Even though some of the women did find employment, the poor condition of the work environment, the discriminatory practices, the irregular hours and the unstable and insecure nature of the work makes it difficult for them to retain the job. The jobs they find are predominantly in the retail and service sector, in the restaurant, retailing and garment industries. Many can only find work in the ethnic enclave, in Chinese businesses. These are part-time, insecure jobs with no benefits. The women work irregular and shift work, and are often paid below minimum wage as one Mainland woman explained:

I found a job through a job agency in 2 months, that was a confectionery factory. The first day I worked there from 12 midnight till morning. The factory did not have good hygiene, it was dirty. My impression of it was bad. The supervisor was not friendly to us at all. I worked only 1 day, and was asked to pay a $20 union fee, which was supposed to be a monthly fee. But we worked only one day,
then they didn’t call me back to work. One week later, they called me back to work, and asked me to pay another $20 union fee. It was not fair. We felt really discriminated, exploited and bullied. My language was not good enough to argue with them. Their attitude towards us was very bad. One of my Chinese friends worked there for 3 days, and they only paid her for 2 days. When I deducted the transportation fees and union fees, I only got a bit over $20 left for a whole day’s work. They paid us $7.65/h. I worked for only 2 days, and I didn’t want to go back there any more. My husband found a job in a mattress factory, full-time, hard work. He was paid $9.50/h. You know we have never done this kind of work when we were in China. Now after immigration, we became laborers.

Not only was this woman underemployed, she was unfairly treated and exploited by her employer and supervisor. The Canadian labor market has been less than hospitable to workers. In the past, women have made concrete gains in paid employment through the union movement. The right to bargain collectively in large workplaces has made the most difference in improving wages and working conditions in women’s paid jobs. In fact, unionization has promoted pay equity for women (Labour Canada, 1992; Luxton & Reiter, 1997). Public sector unions offer much better protection than their private sector counterparts on issues such as discrimination, sexual harassment, health and safety risks and work reassignments. However, although unions guarantee some protection for workers, they can also exclude the most vulnerable sector of workers—the part-time, temporary, flexible labor force. First of all, it is more difficult for these workers to unionize. Besides, the neoliberal climate of structural adjustment and privatization has eroded the power of the unions and women’s participation in it (Luxton & Reiter, 1997).

As the above example shows, the most disadvantaged are women in contingent, flexible jobs. Without seniority they feel doubly exploited by having to pay high union dues, which they cannot afford, and at the same, not reaping the benefits of union protection in terms of job security.

The Chinese women’s underemployment and unemployment in the new country has undermined their sense of stability and well-being. The difficulties some of them encountered in communicating in English also exacerbate their feelings of isolation and depression. The relative affluence of the HK women did allow them more choices, affording some the option of not participating in the paid labor force. The HK women who experienced underemployment found it difficult at first. But many endured this with patience and tenacity, hoping to obtain better positions in the future. Here, a HK woman told me her difficulties:

It was difficult for me at first because I had been working as a bank supervisor in Hong Kong, and all of a sudden, I was only a teller here. I had to learn to be supervised by other people and to learn to take their orders rather than vice versa. I stayed in that job for over 2 years. It is a lot better now with this position because I am now working more independently.

When they were in Hong Kong or in China, the higher education and professional skills of these women ensured that they would have secure careers. For the Mainland women, whether they had worked for the government or for businesses, they never had to worry about their livelihood. For the HK women, the booming economy in the 1980s and 1990s and the low unemployment rate in Hong Kong relative to that of Canada meant that they never had to confront unemployment. Immigration ruptured their careers. Their immigrant status in Canada meant that they had to curtail their previous careers, thus transforming their everyday lives in the new country. Many immigrant women were frustrated by the discrepancies in their expectations and the reality of the harsh life in Canada. Here’s how one Mainland woman analyzed her situation. Her analysis echoes other Chinese immigrant women’s experiences in Canada:

We thought that if the Immigration Department accepted us as “other independent” [skilled workers] class immigrants, and we got in with high points because of our profession and education, we shouldn’t have difficulty in getting jobs. So it’s an expectation problem.

One woman had to give up her own hope of being retrained as a teacher in order to support her husband
to be retrained as a physician since his qualification was not recognized in Canada. Many foreign-trained immigrant physicians are unable to get a license to practice even after passing the Medical Council of Canada evaluation examinations and the College of Family Physician examinations because they are unable to obtain a medical residency position. To be able to obtain a license to practice, the candidate must work for at least 2 years in a residency program. As a result of budgetary constraints and restructuring in the healthcare system, the provincial governments have frozen the number of residency positions at teaching hospitals. Since 1999, the shortage of doctors has prompted the governments to increase the number of medical school positions, but there has been no corresponding increase in the number of residency positions. Currently, there are as many as 4000 foreign-trained physicians in Ontario who are waiting to be re-trained and licensed, while there are only 50–75 spots in specific specialties. Many internationally trained physicians have had to work in menial positions to make ends meet as the re-certification process can take more than ten years (Jimenez, 2003). In 2002, 670 international medical graduates passed the necessary Canadian exams to qualify for residency, but only 67 got a place (Bueckert, 2003).

Conclusion

As the processes of globalization, privatization, transnationalization and deindustrialization deepen, the Canadian state in an effort to take full advantage of the fluidity and flexibility of human capital is launching new initiatives to actively recruit skilled immigrants to the country. However, neoliberal policies and practices, mediated by the accreditation requirements of professional organizations and regulatory bodies, labor market conditions, gendered and racialized discriminatory practices embedded in Canadian society and women’s responsibilities in the home intersect in complex ways to marginalize highly educated and skilled Chinese immigrant women. It is evident from this research that these women’s lived experiences are drastically transformed after they immigrate to Canada. In the labor market, employment practices which require “Canadian experience”, restrictive professional accreditation processes and the lack of recognition of immigrant women’s foreign credentials and work experience disadvantage these women. As a result, these highly educated, skilled immigrant professionals have become deskilled workers or are unemployed. The jobs they have obtained are often low-status, low-paid and part-time positions, which they may take up in order to meet their immediate requirements. In the home, the absence of a support system in the new country, such as members of the extended family or hired help exacerbates the workload of these women. The inadequacy of childcare services and the lack of childcare subsidies, coupled with the women’s diminished earning power make it difficult for them to afford daycare services for their children. Their household and childcare responsibilities in turn prevented them from engaging in full-time positions, and in some cases, deterred them from taking English language classes. Moreover, existing English classes are often inadequate for meeting the employment needs of these professional and highly skilled women. Thus, the “brain drain” from developing countries has become “deskilled” labor in the new country. As one disillusioned woman from China commented indignantly:

I think Canada needs laborers, but not professionals... Now they use professional people to do menial labor. How do you expect us to function well psychologically?

The use of immigration policy to meet the Canadian state’s requirement for skilled labor is being negated through other institutional policies and practices. Skilled immigrants are being deskilled in Canada and this deskilling is complicated by the contradictory processes of globalization and economic restructuring, with its polarizing effects along axis of gender, race, ethnicity, class and citizenship. For immigrant women to become equal and active participants in Canadian society resources must be made available to them. This requires changes in state policies and institutional support for community agen-
cies servicing new immigrants. To accomplish this, the rhetoric of neoliberalism and hegemonic thinking about the natural and inevitable force of the market must first be unmasked. With the provision of inclusive programs and policies, Chinese immigrant women will be able to enjoy equal opportunity and outcome.

It should be noted that immigrant women are not merely passive victims of the social, economic and political processes of Canadian society. Chinese immigrant women are utilizing their agency in procuring assistance from their family networks and demanding better services from community agencies. They have voiced their criticism of the Canadian social system and have refused to take on jobs that underpay and discriminate against them. Skilled professionals have formed their own professional organizations such as the Chinese Professional Women of Canada, the Chinese Professionals Association of Canada and Immigrant Women in Science.9 They have joined with other groups to lobby the government on issues relating to accreditation, retraining and job related language courses. Grassroots advocacy organizations such as the Chinese Canadian National Council and the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society are active in organizing grassroots activism from below to effect change. It is hoped that the success of these immigrant women will reverse the diminishing budgetary allocations for programs to support migrant women and will enable such women to integrate into an anti-racist and anti-sexist Canadian state.

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