



Transnational Communities

An ESRC Research Programme

GENDER, HOUSEHOLDS AND IDENTITY IN BRITISH AND SINGAPOREAN MIGRATION TO CHINA

Principal Investigators

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Aims and objectives

The international migration of professional workers has increased in scope over the past twenty years as skilled workers are needed when companies' activities cross national borders. While this trend has been recognised from an economic perspective, very little has been researched from a social angle. In particular, scant attention has been paid to the gender composition of this population movement, and the impacts of such migration on households, particularly women's work patterns and the organisation of domestic work. This project focuses on these issues, using the case studies of British and Singaporean migration to China. This comparison is of great interest because it allows the effect of cultural differences (both business culture and social norms regarding gender and the family) to be considered.

Duration of research

October 1998 to June 2001

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Methodology/study design

Between October 1998 and June 2001, 150 interviews were conducted with Singaporeans and Britons in the UK, Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China (Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai). Interviewees fell into one of four groups

1. Individuals working in China/ had worked in China
2. Individuals accompanying/ had accompanied spouse/partner to China
3. Individuals working for companies where Chinese postings are a possibility, but they have chosen not to take up an overseas posting
4. Individuals whose partner/spouse is working in China, but they have stayed in the UK or Singapore.

In addition, interviews were conducted with personnel managers for ten companies who post employees to China. Representatives of the Singapore Clubs and British Chambers of Commerce in all study areas were interviewed, as were representatives of a number of expatriate organisations.

Academic and Policy implications

This research has provided an empirical grounding for theoretical approaches to gender and skilled migration, emphasising the importance of nationality, ethnicity and destination. The overseas deployment of professional personnel is of key importance to the success of individual companies and, by extension, their home country. This project has provided important material for policy formulation both in the UK and Singapore. It provides a summary of the nature of professional migration to China, including its extent, destinations and migrants' characteristics. It also highlights the problems experienced by both migrating and non-migrating households and examples of 'best practice' in relocation.

"some companies identify China as a 'hardship' posting so are less willing to post women"

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overview of composition

• Estimated 26,000 Britons in main urban areas in eastern China (Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Suzhou & Wuxi). Estimated 15,000 Singaporeans.

• Hong Kong is the main destination for both groups, but Beijing and Shanghai are also significant. Large group of Singaporeans in Suzhou and Wuxi because of Singaporean infrastructure investment projects.

• Men are far more likely to be posted overseas than women. The companies involved in overseas postings are often in very male-dominated sectors (diplomatic service, finance, engineering, chemicals, ship-building) so this pattern is expected. However, some companies identify China as a 'hardship' posting so are less willing to post women.

• Marital status affects women's migration far more than men's. While single men may find relocation to China easier than their married counterparts, marriage *per se* does not restrict men's mobility to the same degree as women.

• Most Singaporeans are posted to China by multinational companies or government related companies. In contrast, for Britons, while expatriate postings are common, work is also found through applying to Chinese-based companies from the UK,

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or using networks within China once they have arrived.

“ Almost 100% of Singaporean migrants to China are ethnically Chinese. Among British migrants, the vast majority (over 95%) are White British, but there are some British-born Chinese in the migration flows. Other ethnic groups are represented, but only by a few individuals.

Gender identity and migration

“ Migration decision-making among couples tends to be more equal among Britons than Singaporeans. This could be a reflection of the differing prevailing gender ideologies in the two countries, but also that in the case of Singapore, there are more possibilities for ‘commuting’ forms of migration.

“ Migration can lead to a renegotiation of gender identities in a positive way. Both British and Singaporean single migrants often saw migration as a form of ‘liberation’ from the constraints ‘at home’.

“ However, migration can also lead to a reinforcement/ negative reconfiguration of gender identities. Married women who had given up their jobs to accompany their husbands to China often reported frustrations in being defined as an ‘expat wife’ in the domestic sphere, rather than an individual worker in their own right.

“ Single women often felt that their likelihood of marriage was threatened by competition from local Chinese women, Thai and Filipina women. Because of this, a number focused on being ‘career women’ during their time overseas, returning ‘home’ partly to find a partner.

“ There is a clear gender division of labour among couples as part of household strategies in China. Women are largely responsible for household chores, while men are the main breadwinner. Most migrants employ female domestic servants. As this is relatively rare in the UK, for some British couples this results in changes in intra-household dynamics, whereas for Singaporeans used to this,

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“Migration heightens a sense of national identity... Chinese Singaporeans have greater ‘culture shock’ than British-born Chinese”

migration does not result in any changes.

National and ethnic identities

“ Migration heightens a sense of national identity. Being away from ‘home’ gives a new perspective on national identity, particularly as overseas, nationality is one of the characteristics used to identify migrants. For Britons, this sense of national identity is often a new experience, while for Singaporeans, the concept is not new, but is re-worked.

“ Chinese Singaporeans have greater ‘culture shock’ than British-born Chinese. British-born Chinese migrants usually conceive of themselves as ‘western’, so despite Chinese ancestry, they do not expect to ‘fit in’ in China. For Singaporeans, the ‘culture shock’ is usually greater.

“many companies are unaware of the barriers and problems involved in doing business in China”

Company policies

“ Companies need to be realistic about China’s potential. Many companies have entered China seeking to benefit from the large potential market and cheap labour. However, many of these companies are unaware of the barriers and problems involved in doing business in China. Many migrants spoke of the pressures from poorly informed company representatives.

“ Companies need to provide employees with assistance in relocation. A ‘look see’ visit is greatly appreciated and should be offered to partners (where appropriate) as well as the employee.

“ Migrants also appreciated the benefits of being given advice about Chinese business practices, cultural norms etc. before going. This should preferably be done by someone who has also lived and worked in China.

SOME USERS ENGAGED IN THE PROJECT

Singapore International Foundation; British Chambers of Commerce in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Hong Kong; Singapore Chamber of Commerce, Hong Kong; Merseyside China Link; British Consulate, Guangzhou and Shanghai; Guangzhou Professional Women's Association; Expatriate Professional Women's Society, Shanghai; Brits Abroad Club, Shanghai; The British Club, Beijing; Human Resource and Personnel Managers for companies sending staff to China.

SOME CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Willis, K., 2000 Gender, marriage and migration: The case of Singaporeans in China. New Patterns, New Theories: A Conference on International Migration, Nottingham Trent University.

Willis, K., 2001 Skilled migration as an embodied experience: British and Singaporean migration to China. 6th International Metropolis Conference, Rotterdam.

Willis, K., 2002 The family life of highly-skilled migrants: British migrants in China. Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers), Queen's University, Belfast.

Yeoh, B., 2000: On the 'Regional Beat': Singapore men, sexual politics and transnational spaces. Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers, Pittsburgh.

Yeoh, B., 2001 Singaporeans in China: Transnational women elites and the negotiation of gendered identities. 4th International Asia-Pacific Migration Research Network (APMRN) Conference, Manila.

PUBLICATIONS TO DATE

Willis, Katie & Brenda Yeoh (2000) 'Introduction: Gender and Migration', in Katie Willis and Brenda Yeoh (eds.) *Gender and Migration* Edward Elgar 'International Studies in Migration' series, pp.xi-xxii.

Willis, Katie & Brenda Yeoh (2000) 'Gender and transnational household strategies: Singaporean migration to China', *Regional Studies* 34:3, pp.253-64.

Yeoh, Brenda, Shirlena Huang & Katie Willis (2000) 'Global cities, transnational flows and gender dimensions: The view from Singapore', *Tijdschrift Voor Economische en Social Geografie* 91:2, pp.147-58.

WEBSITE

Further information regarding this project can be obtained from the following website:
www.liv.ac.uk/~kwillis/ESRC.html

Transnational Communities Programme

On the programme's website (<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk>) you will find contact details for all the project teams, guidance notes for would-be authors in the book series', information about past and forthcoming events, downloadable working papers, a searchable bibliography of world diasporas and links to related sites. An on-line news digest, TRACES aims to make sense of the human dimensions of globalisation by monitoring news items from around the world and presenting them in summary form. You can register on-line to receive hard copies of newsletters, reminders of website updates and information about related events.

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