

Desperate Housewives---Taiwanese Women in China (Draft)
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Abstract

This study, sponsored by Oriel College, Oxford and Academia Sinica in Taiwan, explores the life of Taiwanese women in China by investigating 14 respondents selected with maximum variation in Dongguan/Shanghai in 2004-2005. I argue that the respondents moved for different reasons. Although they had differing expectations, they met similar barriers after migration, especially a sense of loss due to the lack of suitable companions. Because of the emotional barriers, most respondents were reluctant to settle down after migration.

Keyword: migration, women, hypogamy, Taiwan, China

1. Introduction

Since early 1990, it is estimated that more than one million Taiwanese people have migrated from Taiwan, an industrialized country, to China, a developing country, contrary to the general migration pattern from poorer to richer countries. Among these one million Taiwanese, more than 120,000 and 300,000 were estimated to be living in Dongguan and Shanghai respectively in 2004-2005. Most migrants were business migrants (expatriates and entrepreneurs) who were mainly both pushed by the risk of being jobless at home and pulled by the promise of higher income overseas. Others were family members of business migrants, student migrants, and returnees who mainly moved for non-economic reasons such as family reunion and orientation toward Chinese culture¹. Although their motivation for moving has been partially explored, their post-migration life is not discussed yet.

In my fieldwork, I found most respondents had little will or intention to settle down in China, even though they had lived there for a decade. I found this by examining their attitudes and practices as regards language acquisition, residential pattern, and intermarriage/dating. Most respondents seemed happy with their material life, but few were certain of the probable duration of their residence in China. All but four respondents frequently changed their minds as regards staying

¹ Regarding how many Taiwanese were in China, where they lived, and why they moved to China, please see Ping Lin (2006), "Economic Expectation for Migration to China---Taiwanese Immigrants of Dongguan and Shanghai", paper presented at *The 3rd Annual Conference of European Association of Taiwan Studies*. 30-31 March. Paris, France.

or leaving. Most respondents regarded the Chinese as acquaintances or business partners, not as close friends with whom one would gossip at home. Whilst the political issues (disputes across the Strait, and constraints in China) are regarded as possible barriers between the Taiwanese and the Chinese, I found most respondents were not bothered by the political issues², but by the unexpected cultural gap across the Strait³. This paper further examines how the female respondents perceived their migration from Taiwan to China. Perceptions by other types of Taiwanese (i.e. students and returnees) will be addressed in separated papers.

2. Literature Review

Early studies in social sciences usually assumed that migration involved young males seeking economic benefits in foreign countries, until a special issue of the journal *Anthropological Quarterly* on “Women and Migration” in 1976 (Brettell 2003). Studies on female migration often state that women, especially married women, generally move for the sake of family reunion with persons who have already moved (Mincer 1978, Birrell 1990, Cooke and Bailey 1999, Ho 2006). Some women, especially single females, are more likely to be attracted by economic incentives, and will often enter into marriage with natives as a short cut to obtaining the work/residence permit (McKay 2003, Mix and Piper 2003). Some women may move out of a sense of adventure, or the desire to escape a failed relationship at home (Piper 1997, 2003, SMC 2004), especially if they are single and beyond the age of marriage (Jolly and Reeves 2005).

After migration, woman migrants often occupy the lowliest jobs at the destination, in contrast to their male counterparts. Gender inequality often makes them suffer a double disadvantage as against the natives and the male immigrants; they are often over-represented in poorly paid jobs, or jobs in the domestic/private domain, both of which tend to be looked down upon socially and devalued economically (Garcia et al 2002, Dias and Wanasundera 2002 Piper 2005). Skilled women tend to go into the so-called “welfare and social professions”, such as education and social work in the public domain, to escape this double disadvantage. However, studies on nurse recruited overseas for the UK and Canada state that migrant women are often forced to accept subordinate employment (such as care

² For more details on political integration, please read Ping Lin (2006). “Immigrants and Citizenship, the political integration of Taiwanese in China”, paper presented at *the Annual Conference of the Chinese Association of Political Science*, 16-17 September 2006, Taipei, Taiwan.

³ For more details on cultural integration, please read Ping Lin (2006). “‘Tong-wen-tong-zhong’? The Cultural Integration of Taiwanese in China”, paper presented at *the 3rd Annual Conference on Transborder and Diapora, Governance, Survival, and Movement*, 7-8 October 2006, Taipei, Taiwan.

assistants), even though they work in professional fields (Kofman 2004, Boyd and Pikkov 2004). Because of this deskilling and disqualification, some skilled women have ventured into entrepreneurship in order to gain independence from exploitative practices (Lazardis 2003). Due to these barriers, woman are more likely to perceive their move as a journey, rather than as migration with the aim of settling down at an early stage, and thus they usually need longer periods of time to successfully integrate with the native societies (Yeoh and Huang 2000, Wills and Yeoh 2003). These findings highlight two important factors on female migration: marriage and age. We will examine these two factors in this paper

3. Research Methods and Data

Because of the difficulties in statistical sampling, most related research is based on limited interviews with Taiwanese concerning their investment strategy, firm management, and adaptation of family members in certain Taiwanese firms (Chen 2002; Dong 2004; Wu 2000). Since it is impractical to do a statistical survey, the target of this research is to map the general course of different Taiwanese, rather than providing a picture with clear proportions of types of Taiwanese. In order to achieve this goal, I took ethnography (mainly participant observation, and a few tape-recorded interviews) as the main research method and maximum variation as the sampling strategy, in order to access respondents who were as different as possible.

Sampling and Data

Maximum variation sampling strategy is adopted to obtain the largest range of information and perspectives available within the subject of study (Lincoln 1985; Maykut 1994; Patton 1990). I adopted this strategy to broaden my pre-fieldwork information and gain greater knowledge of Taiwanese with different backgrounds. To practise this strategy, I joined activities conducted by different groups of people or organisations. During these activities and gatherings, I acquired a general picture of local Taiwanese communities, as well as helpful personal connections in searching for potential respondents with different backgrounds. From among these diverse Taiwanese I met on different occasions, I selected some to be the respondents.

Some respondents were selected because they confirmed or challenged the findings of past research. For example, though some research shows that most Taiwanese in China are often middle-aged, middle-educated, married males with pro-China political attitudes who work in Taiwanese firms, I met not only people

conforming to these characteristics but also people from the following categories: single females, people aged below thirty or above sixty, employees of Chinese or international firms, people with anti-China political attitudes, and graduates. Some respondents were selected because they confirmed or challenged the existing theories. For example, when economic theories state that people move for a better monetary income, I selected both respondents who migrated to China purely for higher income and also some who did not. Some respondents were selected because they were the typical cases, some because they were cases at the extreme ends of the spectrum of a particular phenomenon. For example, findings from both previous research and my observations in the field showed that 'business migrants' and 'returnees' were the two typical types of Taiwanese in China. I selected respondents working for different types of Taiwanese firms (IT industry, traditional industries, and services) and first and second generations of Mainlander Taiwanese. Some cases were selected because they were critical cases providing particularly rich or enlightening information. For example, one female respondent was selected because she moved to Shanghai more than ten years ago. During the period, she worked for several different firms, dated local Chinese but eventually married a Taiwanese, and actively participated in Taiwanese gatherings. What's more, she had broad interests in the study of anthropology. She not only provided me with valuable information but also gave me meaningful insights into the information that I had obtained. The purpose of these observations and interviews was to understand the self-evaluation of respondents. How did they regard their migration motivations and post-migration life? Interviews were mainly conducted in Mandarin, and partially in Holo or Cantonese, but the working language of analysis is English. There was no formal questionnaire, and no attempt was made to quantify interviewee responses, other than to note how frequently a particular observation was recorded. Like most sampling processes in qualitative research, the sampling in this research started with *snow-balling* techniques in some easy cases, but ended with a large range of different respondents. In total, I obtained thirty respondents in Dongguan and twenty-one in Shanghai.

The basic features of respondents can be summarised as following. Among these fifty-one respondents, twenty-one were female. Their ages ranged from nineteen to fifty-five. All of them have more than twelve years of school education. Some of them are newly graduated without any work experience in Taiwan, but others have differing lengths of working experience before migration. When I met them in 2004/2005, respondents might have lived in China for only a few months,

several years, or more than ten years⁴.

Limits

Information from these diverse resources helps us make our interpretation as representative as possible. Although I took the maximum strategy to access more Taiwanese with varied background, there are some limitations to this research. I did not get any respondents from the criminal Taiwanese or Taiwanese made redundant in China, although I am aware of the existence of these groups. The respondents in this research were not selected based on statistically representative sample, but maximum variation. So this research cannot present the responses of proportionate Taiwanese in both cities, but display the same responses from people with different backgrounds. Although the discussion of migration motivation is based on the retrospective question, we also check their opinions by observing their daily life to lower the risks of misinterpreting⁵. Despite these drawbacks, this research provides a wealth of new information and worthy of being noticed.

4. Results

Findings from past studies highlight two important factors on female migration: marriage and age. Because of this second plausible factor of marriage, we separate all the fourteen female respondents into two groups: eight married and fourteen singles. Because Taiwan's statistical data states that more than seventy percent of Taiwanese women enter into their first marriage under the age of thirty⁶, we further separate all the fourteen singles into two groups according to their age at the initial point of migration: six young (age below thirty) and eight mature (age thirty and above)⁷. Then we obtained the following results:

⁴ In addition to respondents' information, and in order to adjudge its representativeness, I also obtained formal data based on the members and activities of *TBDS* (Taiwanese Businessmen's Dongguan School), *HDTS* (Hua Dong Taiwanese School), *DTBA* (Dongguan Taiwanese Business Association), *KTBA* (Kunshan Taiwanese Business Association), *STBS* (Shijie Taiwanese Business Association), *TAO* (Taiwan Affairs Office) in Dongguan City and Shanghai Metropolis, *Tailian* (affiliated association of TAO), *Tzu-chi* (one of the branches of Taiwanese Buddhists) in Shanghai, and *NADT* (Native Association of Dongguanese in Taipei). I must stress that these institutions and organizations are very important in the fieldwork. Activities sponsored by them offered me good arenas in which to participate and observe respondents' lives.

⁵ I must stress that the institutions and organizations in the previous notes are very important in the fieldwork. Activities sponsored by them offered me not only good arenas in which to participate and observe respondents' lives, but also rich material for the exercise of triangulation techniques.

⁶ Source from Weekly Statistics, Ministry of Interior, <http://sowf.moi.gov.tw/stat/week/week9420.doc>

⁷ By coincidence, all the six young respondents were in Dongguan and seven out of eight mature were respondents in Shanghai, but we have no further information to state whether it represents the general feature of women's age in both cities.

4.1 From “*My husband is here*” to “*Aunt*”---motivations

We firstly discuss the eight women getting married before migration. Seven of these married female straight stated, “*I came here because my husband is here*” (e.g. Field notes 08/11/2004 and 29/10/04) in reply to questions as to their motives for moving to China.⁸ Obtaining reunion with their husbands who lived in China was their main motivation. Because of this reason, they relied heavily on their husbands for information. Although they might consider their post-migration career development when migrating, none of them regarded it as a crucial factor in making that decision in the way that the male respondents did. Their knowledge of China and professional skills did not play an important role in the migration decision, but served as *ad hoc* tools to make their move successful. This “men go first; women follow” pattern is quite common amongst married female respondents in both cities, and it confirms the findings of past research on married women.

Now, we look at the eight singles that moved after the age of thirty. They might not have prestigious educational performance, but all of them had years of working experience before their move. Whilst seven out of eight married respondents had husbands in Dongguan/Shanghai before moving, none of the eight mature singles had relatives in Dongguan/Shanghai or nearby cities before migration. When I asked them in our first conversation why they had moved to Dongguan/Shanghai, six out of eight⁹ replied with similar answers - “*my friends asked me to explore the business opportunity with them so I came here*” - to most male respondents (i.e. Field note on 06/03/05). They also stressed that their information in relation to migration was mainly obtained from their “friends in business”, not from their family members. However, after meeting them several times and gossiping on issues about marriage and dating on different occasions, five of them (Joy, Xia, Y-lin, Luo, and Nana) expressed their migrations motivations with slightly different answers. They gave me replies like “*After breaking up/divorcing with him (ex-boyfriend or ex-husband), I came here.*” (i.e. Field notes on 01/07/06 and 23/04/05) Although all these five respondents had stable jobs and income in Taiwan, they finally admitted that they left Taiwan partially to escape the network interwoven with the failed relationship. They regarded moving to China as chance to search for a life unbound by the unhappy relationships.

⁸The only exception is Ken-M in Dongguan. She treated her moving to China as an opportunity to travel around China.

⁹ The only two exceptions are Joy and Dianne. They are the second generation of Mainlander Taiwanese. We will discuss their motivations in other papers

Then we explore the final six single respondents who moved before age of thirty. They all had twelve to fourteen years of school education and limited (or no) working experience in Taiwan. But they worked as employees at Taiwanese firms in Dongguan. When I asked how they obtained their jobs, I got similar responses along the lines of “*I got it by luck*”(i.e. Field note 19/10/04). But information from their friends suggested that five out of these six girls (except Nora) obtained their jobs because their relatives (uncle, aunt, or parents) had important relationships with the firms they worked for. Thus they could have jobs with income: “*NT 30 to 40 thousand per month without any working experience in Taiwan. It is quite a lot to them, just like our Peggy. She addressed her [Zhuang, one manager of a firm] as ‘aunt’*”(Field note 19/10/04). It suggests the importance of family connection to these young female respondents in China.

In this section, we find female respondents had motivations different to their male counterparts. We are not arguing that female respondents moved for totally different reasons, but illustrating that some factors were more important for female respondents. Whilst male respondents mainly moved for economic benefits or career opportunities, female respondents paid more attention to their emotional concerns and relied more on their family connections. All these findings basically confirm the arguments in past research. In the following section, we discuss respondents’ life and perceptions after migration.

4.2“ ¥ 2500 as a Phone Operator”---Desperate Housewives

How is their life after migration? I found a strong sense of loneliness among female respondents in both cities. This sense of being rich but lonely was echoed when I talked with married females not in Taiwanese schools. For example, Yu, a married woman working in Shanghai arrived in Shanghai in February 2003, two months before the break of SARS disease, said, “*most inter-province travel and activities were either restricted or cancelled by SARS in 2003. I could not go anywhere and felt quite depressed. One day, I burst into tears because I don't have friends here*”. With help from her formal colleagues in Taiwan, she got her job in Shanghai. Although her pay was only half what it would have been in Taiwan, she was happy because “*life is not only eating and shopping all the day. I am lucky... Most Taiwanese Ma-Ma [married female] are not happy here because of having no job. One Ma-Ma is working at a Taiwanese firm as a phone operator, which pays ¥2500 per month, but she is very happy.*” (Interview 20/05/05)

Stories like Yu are not often “circulated”, but rather “sensed”, in both cities. Frequently during my fieldwork, respondents (such as David in Shanghai and Sh-Min in Dongguan) posed questions like “*how do you get this job [part-time school teacher]?*” and “*can you help my friend Mrs X [to get a job like yours]?*” In the beginning, I was surprised; and, though their Mrs X needed a job to make money, I told them that my pay as a part-time schoolteacher was limited and that Mrs X would therefore not be happy with it. Then they told me that their friends Mrs X were wives of some busy entrepreneurs. Mrs X felt lonely at home and hoped to have a job to ‘*do something*’ and associate with other Taiwanese. Mrs X was often well educated and experienced in the public sector (i.e. schoolteachers, nurses, and civil servants) in Taiwan, but she had little chance of obtaining similar jobs in China. She cared little about the salary but rather whom she worked with. So, working as a schoolteacher in a Taiwanese school is a good job from her perspective.

The cases of Yu, Yu’s friends, and Mrs X reveal how these married females find their lives after migration. Without economic pressures, they enjoyed the material pleasures available in China. However, they felt lonely and sad because they did not have companions in China. To these women, working with other Taiwanese to make new friends is more important than making money *per se*. Whilst previous research states women are often forced to take the lowest-paid jobs, married females in this research also faced similar problems. However, their reasons for taking these low-paid jobs are different. The labour women are forced to do results from the economic pressures and discrimination in the host societies. Married females took these low-paid jobs so that they could have more of a social life. This motivation for low-paid jobs further portrays the low level of integration of married females.

4.3 “*Not on his bicycle*” and “*Big Cross*”--- Lonely Ladies

Dating or intermarriage with the natives is an important feature when discussing the integration of single immigrants. Studies on intermarriage across the Strait display the features of the marriage gradient of romance between Taiwanese men and Chinese women. But there is little discussion of the perspectives of Taiwanese women. I found most single females were reluctant to associate with, let alone date, Chinese men. Only four (three in Shanghai, one in Dongguan) out of fourteen respondents had experience of this. What is the barrier between the female respondents and the Chinese men? We take the case of L-wen and Nora for illustration.

I asked L-wen, "Have you dated a handsome Chinese guy here? You are beautiful. There must be some handsome Chinese guys hoping to date you..." She replied me, "Once a guy... yes... he asked me whether I would sit on his bicycle [on the back seat]. He wanted to cycle out with me. I don't want to sit on his bicycle..." After lunch, we said good-bye on the street. I saw her grabbing a taxi back home.

(Field note 14/11/04)

Due to the gap in salary between Taiwanese and Chinese, there is gap of buying power in between. This gap in buying power was one of the factors segregating the respondents and the natives (Lin 2006). This gap also existed between single females and the Chinese men around them. As I observed, these ladies regarded shopping, playing bowls, or eating meals at fancy restaurants as "normal" recreation at the weekend. They often took taxis or private cars as their main means of transportation, and regarded the local public transportation as "dirty and unsafe". However, most Chinese men around them were much less wealthy. They often preferred playing football, shopping at the night market, and having meals at food-stands as "affordable" recreation on the weekend. It is no surprise that L-wen's Chinese friend regarded "cycling together" as an activity to possible romance, but it is also reasonable that L-wen rejected this invitation. Although L-wen also looked forward to some romance, she regarded her Chinese male friends as "disqualified" from being boy-friend candidates.¹⁰

If these single ladies regarded most Chinese guys as "disqualified" for the purposes of romance, what did they think of dating Taiwanese men in China? However, Press stories and past research often portray Taiwanese men as "horny" because of their casual affairs with Chinese women (Lang and Smart 2002, Shen 2005) and most female respondents in this research seem to accept this stereotype. *"If you want to get a good guy to get married, you should go back to Taiwan. Almost all Taiwanese men here are big cross [too bad, untouchable]"* was the advice Nora (age 23) obtained from other Taiwanese women in Dongguan. This advice reveals how the Taiwanese women in general regarded Taiwanese men in China. Taiwanese women regarded most Taiwanese men in China as unavailable because they were married, too busy at work, or too busy at flirting with the Chinese¹¹. So they regarded Taiwanese men as good partners at work, but bad as

¹⁰ I am not arguing the buying power of the Chinese man is very important in a relationship with a Taiwanese girl. But the gap of buying power contributes to the gap in recreation, which creates more barriers between Chinese men and Taiwanese ladies.

¹¹ In my observation, almost all Taiwanese men had some "casual affairs" with Chinese women or

romantic partners. Although these women enjoyed material pleasures in China, they often felt a sense of loneliness and unhappiness in China¹².

5. Conclusion

In the previous papers, we discussed how entrepreneurs or employees of Taiwanese firms perceived their migration to China. In this paper, we analyse the perception by females. Their particular backgrounds provide us with some information valuable to, but which has been missed in, the general discussion.

In the discussion of female respondents, we find women moved to China for three different motivations. Married women moved to China for the sake of family reunion with the husbands, who had already moved. For single and mature women, they had unhappy relationships (or constricting family ties) in Taiwan, and they regarded moving to China as a path to a new life. These single and young women were very similar to other expatriate employees. They moved to China because of the risk of being jobless at home and the promise of jobs with good income, with help from their key family members.

Although they had different expectations, they met similar barriers in China. They felt lonely, without proper companions. As regards the married women, they felt lonely and sad because life consisted of pointless leisure all day. They expected to have jobs and social networks similar to those in Taiwan, but only a few of them successfully found such. These single women felt lonely without proper male companions as a precursor to possible marriage. The image of orientation to homogamy marriage pushed them to seek potential partners among Taiwanese or Chinese, but they felt reluctant to associate with the Chinese because of the worries of hypogamy. They felt reluctant to date Taiwanese because they regarded most Taiwanese men as too busy, either at work or in having too many affairs with Chinese women.

female entertainers at the sex-orientated foot massage or karaoke.

¹² I have to admit that it is difficult to provide concrete information to prove this sense of loneliness, because women are not encouraged to express their lust for men whether in Taiwan or China. However, it is easy to sense this “sadness” among the single women without partners. The following incident may illustrate this sense of loneliness. In December 2004, the Board Director (Mr Ye) and principal (Ms Zhuang) suddenly organised two meetings for Taiwanese males and females in the school. In the meeting for men, Mr Ye revealed that a Taiwanese man (X) was in police custody because of visiting a prostitute. He asked all participants to “behave themselves” and gave his home number to everyone in case of any “emergency”. In the meeting for women, as one female participant told me, Ms Zhuang just asked all participants to be “back to school before 11 pm” without explanations. Whilst men appreciated the “reminder” from Mr Ye, women were very unhappy with this “curfew at 11 pm” A female divorcee in her early thirties complained that “*you men are in the men’s paradise*”, and mentioned her boring life without sex for more than a year. She said her pleasure of dancing in discos was diminished by this “11 pm curfew” which had been put in place because of men.