‘Astronaut families’: transnational lives of middle-class Taiwanese married women in Canada

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Despite increasing interest in the study of Taiwanese migrants, the underlying concept and methodology remain gender-blind. Invisible from the Census are the women who emigrated with their husbands, leaving behind their adopted country to make a living elsewhere. Most of the ‘astronaut wives’ studied in this research are middle-class women who had careers in Taiwan prior to emigration, but became full-time home-makers upon arrival in Canada, the host country. The major questions raised for this research are: (1) What are the circumstances of migration for Taiwanese families? (2) How do Taiwanese ‘dan qi ma ma’/‘astronaut wives’ cope with the challenges of the new environment? (3) How do they relate to their husbands, children, and the Taiwanese community during the process of adaptation? Thirty women from ‘astronaut’ families were interviewed in Toronto and Vancouver in 2005 and 2006, using a semi-structured questionnaire, ethnographic interviews, and participant observation methods. It was found that migration has not liberated them from the traditional familial roles in Taiwan, but has however enabled them to build new social networks that play an important role in their new lives.

Key words: ‘Astronaut wives’, transnational lives, Taiwanese community, Canada.

Introduction

Like many affluent East Asian societies, the wave of Taiwan emigration in the last three decades has been driven primarily by a fear of political instability, desire for a global education for one’s own children, and an aspiration for a better lifestyle. Emigration is much more common among the middle-class families as their cultural and social capital give them more options as to which countries they may migrate to, where they settle, and how they adapt in the host countries. Their preference of moving to the English-speaking

world is shown by the large numbers that have immigrated to the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. A similar pattern is found among the Chinese (those from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) who have made circulatory movements rather than migrating permanently, like those in earlier migration waves. A research gap seems to exist on the Taiwanese immigrants residing in these countries, probably due to their smaller proportions compared to other Chinese.

In recent years, there have been more females than males migrating from Taiwan to Canada. A similar phenomenon has already

been observed of Hong Kong-born individuals aged over 25 years in Vancouver and Toronto more than a decade ago (Skeldon 1997), and Taiwan-born immigrants between 40 and 59 years old to Australia (Chiang 2004). This is partly the result of at least one adult returning to Asia after settlement, usually the husband who is the breadwinner, who commutes across the Pacific and leaves the wife and children in the countries of the new home.

This new form of Chinese transnational family, whereby wives and children live in the countries of immigration, while husbands work in their homelands, or another part of the world, deserve more attention from scholars studying new Chinese diaspora. Although there are no statistics on transnational families, it was found from the authors' field experience and literature that 'astronaut families'¹ and 'parachute kids'/'satellite kids' (Waters 2003) are common in Canada as in Australia (Chiang 2004, 2006; Pe-Pua, Mitchell, Iredale, and Castles 1996). As suggested by Ley and Waters (2004), the development of 'astronaut' households, where one family member returns to East Asia to maximize their earnings while the rest of the family remain in Canada, has a range of implications that go well beyond a narrowly defined economic strategy.

In this study, I hope to reconstruct and illuminate through qualitative studies the roles and experiences of migrant women who have been 'hidden' as the dependants of male migrants. The major questions raised for this research are: (1) What are the circumstances of migration of Taiwanese families? (2) How do Taiwanese 'dan qi ma ma'²/'astronaut wives' cope with the challenges of the new environment? (3) How do they relate to their husbands, children, and the Taiwanese community during the process of adaptation?

By focusing on women's roles in the 'astronaut' family, this paper challenges

migration theories which have assumed that women play passive roles in migration, as they have been labelled as 'associational' or 'passive' migrants. The higher proportion of women among migrants due to the prevalence of 'astronaut' families should be given further attention for formulating immigration policies. Through a qualitative study, this paper seeks to examine the mechanisms and strategies that middle-class women of Taiwanese 'astronaut families' adopt to cope with their 'transnational lives'.

In the following, I will first provide the situation of Taiwanese in the Canadian context and briefly review theory on transnational families. Following a discussion of the methodology, I will present the findings and draw some conclusions on the meaning of transnational families.

Review of pertinent literature

The Canadian context

Chinese constitute the largest number of visible minorities group in Canada. According to the 2001 Census, more than one million Chinese have immigrated to Canada, forming the largest group of non-European immigrants. Between 1992 and 2002, 550,000 Chinese immigrants have entered Canada, in the order of Mainland China (44.3 per cent), Hong Kong (40.8 per cent), and Taiwan (14.9 per cent) (Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission 2003).

On average, Chinese immigrants are younger, and have obtained higher education than Canadians at the time of migration. Chinese are predominately trained in technology education, including mathematics, physics, computer science and engineering. They are mainly employed in science and

technology-oriented industry, followed by commerce, finance and administration. However, they have a low level of employment, and high rate of unemployment, with a lower average income than Canadians.

Canada is the most popular destination for Taiwanese immigrants after the USA; 1979 is the watershed year for old and new migrants, when the USA severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan, forming the first wave of migrants. A second wave of increased migration from Taiwan to the USA culminated in 1997. Before the turn of the century, a third wave of skilled migrants took place due to the political instability caused by Mainland China's stance towards Taiwan (Lo and Wang 2004). While Australia and Canada have competed for Chinese business migration from the Asia-Pacific region since the late 1970s, Canadian business migration programmes have received higher proportions of business immigrants than Australia (Wong 2003). Approximately one-half of the Taiwanese immigrants to Canada in recent years came as business immigrants while the other half came via the independent skilled worker or family classes (Wong 2004). The 2001 Census records 70,790 Taiwan-born immigrants living in Vancouver (64 per cent, or 45,390 persons) and Greater Toronto (22 per cent, or 15,570 persons) and other cities. The Taiwanese communities in Canada fit the description of 'asset rich, income poor' immigrants, and are located in upscale middle-class neighbourhoods, where the quality of schools is generally good, like in the case of Taiwanese immigrants in the USA (Zhou 1998).

Among the Taiwanese immigrants, a larger number of females have been recorded over different time periods from 1961 to 2001, as shown in Table 1. The sex ratio is 0.92 (female = 100) in 2001.

Table 1 Trend of population increase of Taiwan-born in Canada, 1961–2001

Period of immigration	Total	Female	Male
Total population	70,790	36,770	34,020
Before 1961	20	15	10
1961–1970	1,255	645	610
1971–1980	3,540	1,990	3,870
1981–1990	8,530	4,655	3,870
1991–2001	53,750	27,600	26,155
1991–1995	23,405	11,885	11,520
1996–2001	30,345	15,715	14,630
Immigrant population	67,095	34,905	32,190
Non-immigrant	170	110	60
Non-permanent residents	3,525	1,755	1,770

Source: Hsu and Chi (2005: 28). The tabulation was based on unpublished data from Statistics Canada (2003).

Transnational families

Transnational families have occurred in recent Chinese history, situations in the sending and receiving areas were different then. In the late nineteenth century, Diasporic Chinese started their immigration to Anglo-America, Australasia and South-East Asia as fortune seekers and labourers in railroad construction, mostly from four counties in the province of Guangdong. In those days, the movement was almost all made by men, with the intention of sojourning, and returning with saved money, while the women and children left behind in China lived on remittances. As caring for children and parents-in-law was a major responsibility of the wives, it is primarily women who absorb most of the cost in their transnational family strategy (Chee 2005).

In an age of globalization, the traditional notion of international migration as a linear process is scrutinized, particularly with regard to 'New Asian' immigration. As pointed out by Portes (1997: 812), 'participants [in the transnational community] are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures,

frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both [places]' (Portes 1997: 812). As maintained by Basch and her collaborators, 'Transnationalism' is the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement ... many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders (Basch, Schiller and Szanton 1994: 6). However, gender differences in this social field have not been well documented. Studying different members of the family in the process of transnationalism would add meaning to immigrants' settlement experiences and shed light on policies.

Methodology and profile of interviewees

My previous research on Taiwanese immigration to Australia has covered employment patterns, residential choice and mobility, women's roles in families, and adaptation and identity formation of the '1.5 generation' of Taiwanese migrants (Chiang and Hsu 2005, 2006; Chiang and Liao 2006). Sensitive micro-level field research has been used, apart from multi-method methodologies in destination cities, employing census statistics and surveys as background work. In this research, an ethnographic interpretation with participant observation is applied to the fieldwork, allowing the author to understand the 'emotions, experiences, and significance' of migration (Graham 1999).

Thirty women were interviewed in 2005–2006 using a snowball sampling method with a semi-structured questionnaire.³ With this method, I hope to look into the subjective experiences of the astronaut wives from an

insider's perspective, giving voice to the immigrants and focusing on their self-assessment of the adaptation process. Interviews took place in different places and during various occasions, such as their homes, places of worship, Taiwanese associations, the Chinese schools that their children attended, restaurants, and coffee shops. Recruiting respondents using the snowball technique enables the writer to establish rapport and trust, which is essential to in-depth interviews. However, the sample may be self-selective due to the tendency to include those who are available or willing to be interviewed. Women who have returned to Taiwan to visit their husbands for weeks may be left out in this sample.

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the details of the respondents in Vancouver and Toronto, respectively. The women were aged between 40 and 60, and arrived in Canada between 1981 and 2002. Most of them had lived in large cities, and had a high level of education (the majority were university-educated, with one holding a degree from a Medical University and one with a Master's degree from the USA). They had all been married at the time of the interview but two were now divorced. All of them had worked before coming to Canada, holding jobs ranging from professional and managerial work to entrepreneurs or helping in their husband's business.

Findings

Circumstances for migration

Based on a survey of 520 households in Vancouver and Toronto, Hsu and Chi (2005) found that the reasons for immigration to Canada are better living environment, education for children, and perceived political

Table II Details of respondents in Vancouver (all names are pseudonyms)

No.	Name, immigration class	Education	Age, year of immigration	Last occupation in Taiwan prior to migration	Occupation in Canada / <i>Volunteer work</i>
V1	Madam Sun, Investor	College	48, 2000	Research assistant	Housewife / <i>Volunteer in TCCS, Tzu chi</i>
V2	Madam Chen, Skilled	Medical University	45–49, 1998	Dentist	Dentist
V3	Madam Deng, Investor	University	40–44, 2000	High school teacher	Housewife
V4	Madam Lo, Investor	College	58, 1993	Owner of business	Housewife
V5	Madam Hu, Skilled	High School	40–44, 2001	Worked in rapid transit system	Housewife
V6	Madam Song, Investor	College	50–54, 1997	Assistant to husband (medical doctor)	Housewife
V7	Madam Peng, Entrepreneur	Vocational College	46–49, 2001	Manager of food business	Housewife, Import–export manager
V8	Madam Tang, Investor	College	40–45, 2002	Assistant to husband (medical doctor)	Housewife
V9	Madam Yu, Investor	Junior High	40–45, 1998	Horticulturalist	Housewife
V10	Madam Yau, Investor	College	40–45, 1990	Co-worker in husband's printing company	Housewife
V11	Madam Wang, Investor	M.A. Graduate	50–54, 2002	Co-worker in husband's business	Housewife, Health food sales manager / <i>Volunteer in Chinese school</i>
V12	Madam Lay, Entrepreneur	College	44–49	Book-keeper	Housewife

instability. This attested Wong's findings that social rather than economic factors were emphasized by immigrants as the reasons that determine why a country is selected (Wong 2003: 320). The outcome of my interviews shows the complexities as discussed in the following.

Parents are very critical of Taiwan's education system, which depends a lot on rote learning and is conducted in 'stuffed duck' (*tien ya*) fashion.⁴ The flexibility and choice offered in Taiwan cannot measure up to the Canadian system, according to two informants, who were interviewed at the same time:

Here in Canada, students can choose their fields of interest at the university. If they drop out, they receive counseling from the University. In Taiwan, the system for changing to a different department is rigid and the

parent and student became laughing stocks among the Taiwanese. (Madam Woo, Madam Huang)

They are critical of the recent education reform (*jiao gai*) in Taiwan. The children of Madam Li (Toronto/Kaohsiung) and Madam Peng (Vancouver/Kaohsiung), a daughter and a son respectively, had bad experiences in their high schools:

My daughter noticed unfair treatment by the teacher and as a result, she did not dare speak up in class. (Madam Li, Toronto)

The teacher only paid attention to the first-rate students. My son was allocated to the lower grade class, which would have given him no hope of getting into a university. (Madam Peng, Vancouver)

Table III Details of respondents in Toronto (all names are pseudonyms)

No.	Name, immigration class	Education	Age, year of immigration	Last occupation in Taiwan prior to migration	Occupation in Canada / <i>Volunteer work</i>
T1	Madam Lu, Investor	University	55, 1990	Real estate business manager	Full-time natural food store manager; real estate agent / <i>Dove Intercultural Society</i>
T2	Madam Li, Investor	College	60, 1995	Nurse, then housewife	Part-time marketing manager / <i>Tzu Chi</i>
T3	Madam Lin, Entrepreneur	University	50, 1996	Entrepreneur	Part-time entrepreneur / <i>Lifeline 6180, Taiwan's Women's Organization, Rong Rong Club</i>
T4	Madam Wan, Entrepreneur	College	56, 2000	Teacher in business school	Housewife / <i>Volunteer</i>
T5	Madam Huang, Independent	College	51, 1990	Primary school teacher	Housewife / <i>Volunteer</i>
T6	Madam Hsu, Skilled	College	48, 1996	Accountant	Housewife / <i>Tzu-chi</i>
T7	Madam Kang, Entrepreneur	University	60, 1981	Nurse	Housewife / <i>Rong Rong Club, Tzu-chi, Lifeline 6180</i>
T8	Madam Tan, Skilled	University	40, 1997	Social worker	Life Choices (Toronto Branch): Association for cancer patients / <i>Lifeline 6180</i>
T9	Madam Woo, Entrepreneur	College	46, 1996	Housewife	Housewife / <i>Leader of women's group in church</i>
T10	Madam Tsui, Skilled	College	45, 1995	Music teacher	Part-time in law firm
T11	Madam Ou, Skilled	University	48, 2001	Law firm associate	Housewife
T12	Madam Chen, Skilled	College	45, 1997	Housewife	Self-employed part-time at 'Sitting the month center' (A place where mothers who have recently given birth can go to relax)
T13	Madam Jou, Investor	Vocational School	40 ~ 45, 2003	Business woman	Housewife
T14	Madam Hsu, Investor	High School	46 ~ 49, 2004	Accountant	Housewife
T15	Madam Shiao, Skilled	High School	50 ~ 54, 1991	Secretary	Real estate agent; selling insurance
T16	Madam Shen, Investor	College	Over 50, 1993	Nurse	Housewife
T17	Madam Liu, Skilled	Vocational School	46, 1997	Senior bank clerk	Senior bank clerk
T18	Madam Peng, Not known; entered with tourist visa	University	54, 1999	High school Chinese teacher	Housewife / <i>Volunteer in church</i>

Note: In 1978, Canada's Business Immigration Program began officially by recognizing two new categories, 'Entrepreneurs' and 'Self-employed' under the Independent Class. As a condition of migration, these migrants were required to invest in the start-up or continuance of Canadian enterprises that would contribute to job creation and local economic development. In 1986, the Program expanded and added a third category called 'Investors' (Wong 2003).

Children have actually begged their parents to send them abroad for high school education, as in the cases of Mesdames Li, Peng and Liu.

Although the reason for leaving Taiwan for a better education has often been mentioned by women, health reasons are often brought up. There were cases where children often got sick in Taiwan, but became much healthier after immigrating to Canada. Madam Yau from Vancouver had a son who had asthma and allergies since kindergarten. They applied for immigration at the suggestion of the doctor. In an interview at her luxurious home, her husband who joined her five years after her immigration recalled:

It was purely accidental that we came to Canada. We had never been abroad before, and did not even know where Vancouver is. We just heard from people that the environment was clean and the education system was good here. We had neither friends nor relatives when we first came. We have also never been worried about the cross-Strait political tension like many of our friends here were. We just made the decision to come without thinking about it much.

The living environment in Taiwan was also often mentioned as a factor to emigrate to Canada. Furthermore, many young boys emigrated so that they would not have to serve in the Taiwanese military: they have to leave Taiwan before the age of 14 to avoid conscription.

The decision process was actually quite complex, although the father is usually the key applicant. In cases when the family all came to Canada at the same time, the husband flew back to Taiwan within two to three months, after failing to find work. In many cases, the children came to study first, and generated a 'chain migration' as the parents followed (the cases of Madam Peng and Madam Li illustrate

this). This was because visa students paid higher fees than immigrants. In most of the cases studied, the husbands did not stay long enough to satisfy residency requirements for citizenship applications, but returned to Taiwan with 'Maple Cards',⁵ while their wives and children remained in Canada.

The age of schooling for children is an important factor for deciding when to move. Madam Wang felt quite comfortable to maintain a transnational family with their 11-year-old son staying with her husband in Taiwan, so that he can learn Chinese until he graduates from primary school, while she and their daughter stay in Vancouver. By the same token, Madam Hu, a resident in Vancouver West, is thinking of returning to Taiwan with her 11-year-old son as it would be easier for him to catch up to the standards of Chinese and mathematics needed in Taiwan's junior high schools now than if they were to return later. Thus the timing of education for her children is also an important consideration.

Relation with husband and children

In most cases, the relationships of '*dan qi ma ma*' with their husbands in Taiwan were positive in spite of years of separation. They communicated with their husbands and family members by e-mail, by telephone, and using Skype.⁶ 'Absence makes the heart feel fonder' seemed to fit most of the respondents,

My husband visits us two to three times a year and stays for one to two months each time. He always comes during the winter to help me shovel snow. (Madam Tan, Toronto)

My husband had a busy life in Taipei, and often travelled to other cities in Asia ... We came as 'entrepreneurs' and our business in Toronto is an

extension of our business in Taiwan ... so we have more to discuss on the phone now because we are not together. In Toronto, I feel that my relationship with my husband has become closer, and he shows more care towards me when I go back to Taiwan ... I now feel close to my son after we immigrated because I had little time for him when I was taking care of our business in Taipei. (Madam Lin)

One can see closer mother and child relationships in Canada than in Taiwan, where the working mother is very busy. On one occasion, in a car with two mothers, I could see how 'astronaut mothers' helped each other. After picking up their children and someone else's children after school, and feeding them with a snack in the car, Madam Sun and Madam Hu took the children to the nearby Chinese school. They then went to their yoga class before picking the children up from the Chinese school again. 'My work begins each day at 3:00 p.m.', said Madam Deng, who has three children in Grades 9, 8 and 3. To get household help, she has just decided to hire a live-in Filipina woman, so that she could manage to do something for herself.

'I have decided to spend my four years here happily', said Madam Wan, a mother of an 'astronaut family' who used to fly over every summer vacation to visit her children in Toronto when she was a teacher in Kaohsiung. After retirement, she joined her two children while her husband remained in Taiwan. In Toronto, she studies English at a school for adults. Once a week, she has a quick lunch and plays bridge with a Korean friend whom she met in the English class. She also joins the Taiwan Glee Club and loves gardening in her house.

Experiences of women vary a lot. Having worked in a women's organization helping other female immigrants through a women's group that once had 300 members, Madam Lu told me the sad stories of other families:

When the family first came to Canada, the husband visited his household in Canada often. The frequency of visits reduced over the years, and he gradually stopped sending money. Later, the husband got a girlfriend in Taiwan or Mainland China, and wanted a divorce.

Madam Tan, a former social worker who set up a hotline in Toronto to help women with their problems (which normally have to do with adapting to the new country), confirmed the commonness of the situation. The lifeline she volunteers for often gets calls from Mainland Chinese women these days. Taiwanese women no longer call them like they did at first because the Taiwanese community then in Toronto was small, and their voices could easily be recognized by the volunteers.

The churches that originated from Taiwan were aware of the frequent presence of '*dan qi ma ma*'. Women whose husbands were in Taiwan or elsewhere often got together informally over tea or dinner, before someone went to Taiwan, or after someone had returned from abroad. Madam Woo, who organized a small women's group that meets weekly, confirmed that many immigrants who had come to the church for help were converted to Christianity.

Often the women voiced their regret and sacrifices: 'It is not fair for the children to stay with one parent at a time,' said Madam Huang, although many Taiwanese in the community envied her for raising good kids who did well in school. She and her husband had taken turns to accompany their children in Toronto. Her husband had left his last job in Taiwan and come to Canada to spend time with his family. Yet when he went back, he was not able to find a good job again and had to take whatever he could get.

Many women whom I interviewed for lengthy periods of time in Toronto and

Vancouver stated: 'Being a mother is my full-time work'. Actions speak louder than words, as they spent a lot of time on their children. In Taiwan, the children's education comes first, and the achievement of the mother is based on the performance of the children—this patriarchal value still prevails. The Taiwanese mothers have actually brought over the custom of sending children to 'cram' schools in Canada, to supplement the education provided by the regular school. Many think that the achievement of children greatly depended on the mother (*You ma ma pei, xiao hai cheng jiu hao*).

On the other hand, many thought that the price was too high to pay for the husband to stay in Taiwan to earn an income to support the family in Vancouver. Some were well aware that the separate and independent lives they and their husband had endured had been going on for too long. Madame Wan, who had been an 'astronaut' for five years, felt like an intruder every time she flew back home to visit her husband. On the other hand, Madam Yu in Vancouver felt that when her husband came from Taiwan, he picked on her for the way she runs their home and their children.

While feeling guilty about not being around their husbands, they tried to fly back to Taiwan as frequently as they could. In fact, when the husbands got older and weaker, they flew less frequently than they did in the first few years. Adaptation by the husbands in Canada is not all that easy. Several women in Vancouver mentioned: 'My husband sleeps all the time to get over jetlag'. One woman (Madam Shen) noticed that her husband was unwilling to drive and come out of the house in winter in Toronto, because a friend recently died of heart attack by staying outdoors in the cold weather. Madam Li thought that her husband would never come to Canada unless she was there. Madam Tan's husband simply

hated to live in Toronto, and stayed back in City K to operate three coffee shops with his friends. Usually, men could not adapt easily to living in Canada without employment. Though not in their plans at first, the fathers stayed around to look for work for several months after landing, and then left for Taiwan.

Madam Liu immigrated because her husband wanted to. In spite of graduating from one of the best universities in Taiwan, he could not find a decent job in Toronto. He lost his self-esteem because he could not find work, while she enjoyed the business that she had started. They later got divorced, and he hoped to divide her money, in accordance with Canadian law.

Immigrant women were stoic and persevering (*ren xing*) in all kinds of situations—learning to drive, acquiring a new language, shovelling snow in winter, volunteering in religious organizations, flying back to Taipei more frequently than their husbands, taking care of young children, taking their children to mathematics, piano and language classes, and teaching Mandarin on the weekends. In the words of quite a few 'astronaut wives', they are prepared for flexibility and courage to face difficult situations.

Even though she has achieved her goal of having her children educated in Canada, Madam Wan in Toronto said that she still did not know if she had done the right thing by coming to Canada and leaving her husband in Taiwan. Madam Yau, who lived apart from her husband for five years, felt extremely lonely. On the other hand, several women were very happy with their 'liberated' lives, such as Madam Woo who is happy to be distanced from her dominating mother-in-law in Taipei. Madam Shen in Toronto also sounded quite happy:

I don't know where I will live in future. Two-thirds of my investment and my house

are in Toronto. For the time being, I like Canada better and I don't mind living here all by myself, when my husband and children have all returned to Taiwan ... my friends think that I am crazy in 'abandoning both husband and children' (*pao fu qi zi*).

The women that were interviewed did not seem to be worried that their husbands in Taiwan might have affairs. When Madam Lu was asked which was her first home, the one in Canada, or the one in Taiwan, she said: 'Both are my homes ... I feel that I have fallen in love with two men at the same time. Canada and Taiwan are both my homes'. She actually spent April to October in Toronto, and returned to Taiwan in winter. The decision of where they would finally settle down in future would be situational. As Ley and Kobayashi noted in the case of Hong Kong returnees from Canada, there is no finality to movement, but always the prospect of another twelve-hour flight and another sojourn (2005: 118).

Social activities: another aspect of transnational lives

Many Taiwanese simply did not look for work when they first came to Canada since they can live off their savings for a short while. According to several informants, they are different from the Mainland Chinese women who looked for employment immediately upon arrival in the country. For those who tried, jobs are hard to find for various reasons: lack of proficiency in English, inexperience in the Canadian way of life, lack of incentive to find work because of one's own economic background, difficulty in finding childcare, lack of 'approval' from husbands, unwillingness to pay high tax, and unwillingness to accept jobs not commensurate with one's education level.

Seven or eight out of ten Taiwan women do not go to work here. It does not pay to work in Canada ... About half of what you earn is gone as tax. Income tax in Canada is very high, and the pay you get is not high enough to pay for childcare. If you do the same amount of work in Taiwan, you retain more after tax deduction, and you also save more. (Madam Shen, Toronto)

As the only informant engaged in full-time employment among my eighteen informants in Toronto, Madam Liu made the point that 'it is really God's gift' that she could find a full-time job in Toronto. Her boss in the Taiwan branch of the bank where she worked wanted her to accept the position in Canada, when she moved to join her daughter who had gone to Toronto earlier to attend school. Madam Huang, who established a sales business in both Vancouver and Taiwan, was very happy with her new self-employment. Madam Chen was the only other woman out of the twelve interviewees in Vancouver who is a fully employed professional. Having passed the examination for dentistry, she had accreditation to work in a dental clinic; but her husband, who was a paediatrician, had to go back to Taiwan because he could not practise in Canada. Though not employed at present, Madam Lu felt that she was the luckiest of all, as she had invested in property with her parents' help many years ago, and had acquired her parents' managerial skills as well.

Because of having a lot of free time, and not worrying about finances, volunteering becomes a significant part of their lives. It gives the new immigrants self-esteem to begin with. It also helps them to kill time, to meet other Taiwanese, and sometimes to earn 'Canadian experience' for employment later on. The *Tzu-chi* Foundation provides an opportunity for voluntary work such as visiting old people in nursing homes. They also extend

help to other countries in emergency situations, including Mainland China, despite differences in religious and political views. Recently, after the damage done to Louisiana by Hurricane Katrina, the *Tzu-chi* members were raising funds in the shopping malls in their own cities. According to the Culture Center of the Taipei Economic & Cultural Office in Scarborough, Toronto, there were over 100 Taiwanese organizations in Toronto. The women's associations in Toronto included the Taiwan Business Association—Women's Branch, Glee Club, Rong-Rong Club, International Dove Cultural Society, Hong-Fook Mental Health Association—Lifeline 6180, and the Taiwan Merchant's Association of Toronto—Women's Group.

The women whom I met in Toronto were mostly happy mothers. Apart from volunteer work, their recreational activities included line dancing, playing *mah-jong*, and meeting in study groups. As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, twelve out of the thirty women I interviewed were engaged in various voluntary activities.

Discussion and conclusions

In this study, I hope to investigate the impact of transnational families on the lives of individuals through an ethnographic analysis of 'astronaut wives', hoping to understand how women negotiate new situations when the family is transferred overseas, like in the 'split-households' that Chee (2005) studied in Southern California, Ho (2002) in New Zealand, and Chiang in Australasia (2004). The consequences of migration are similar in that transnational family life has made it difficult for most of the women to retain their established professional paths. While migration and the transnational arrangement have made some wives more dependent on

husbands for economic support, it has also provided the opportunity for them to become the heads of households, to exercise autonomy and authority (Chee 2005: 196). Like the Hong Kong 'astronaut' families (Man 1995: 316), some husbands and wives in Taiwanese Canadian transnational families also experience increased appreciation and an improved marital relationship.

Like other qualitative studies, I also acknowledge the severe limitation of such sampling procedures which may have left out women who do not want to be interviewed, or have included mostly women who are positive about their experiences in spite of their hardships. Instead of generalizing on 'astronaut wives' from the findings, I hope to identify issues and circumstances presenting the complexities of immigrant's lived experiences. By studying the subjectivities of female migrants, this study may fill in the gap left by the traditional theories of migration and policy decisions.

Even though they are well-off to start with as immigrants, they are like 'study mothers' in reality.⁷ in the Canadian context. The middle-class immigrant women seem to fulfil their traditional roles abroad quite well. Similar to Ip's findings,

inherent hindrances in the job market existed, preventing them from finding suitable employment in spite of the successful pre-migration track record many of them possessed ... The mothers, in particular, interrupted their professional careers, gave up an extensive family support network and opted for a much less stimulating home life. (2002: 163)

From my field experience, I have found that the definition of 'astronaut family' has been over-simplified in previous works. The process of 'astronauting' may differ from one family to another. Although men are usually

breadwinners who support their families abroad, women actually do as much flying as the men, sometimes even more frequently. When the husband's business is transferred to Mainland China, the family can be located in three places rather than two. The social forces at work within globalization and their impact on the micro-processes of family relationships vary among families.

Furthermore, the extent to which Taiwanese social organizations play crucial roles in women's lives needs to be better understood. In both Australia and Canada, Taiwanese organizations have helped to provide women immigrants with an important niche, enabling them to discover themselves, to use their social capital from Taiwan, and help them lead a more fulfilled life in the new country. Volunteering, for instance, increases migrant women's opportunities to meet new friends, and even provides them with *bona fide* 'Canadian experience' which can be used as a prerequisite for getting work later on. Occasionally, it provides them with the opportunity to know other Canadians better. Religious organizations play a crucial role in giving help and counselling to newly arrived families and continues to play important roles in immigrant's transnational lives.

At times, I think that the experience of the '*dan qi ma ma*' is worthy of praise, as children's education is obtained at the expense of parents' lives, especially the mother's. The belief that 'the achievement of a mother lies in her children's education' still holds true to this day in Taiwan, as a critical aspect of Confucian values, and is evident in the immigration process. In the future, comparisons can be made between Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese Canadian women in diasporic Chinese communities, which share the common goals of providing their children with a Western education.

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Notes

- 1 The term 'astronaut' was first used in Hong Kong where the husband after immigration, return to their homelands to make a living to support their wives and children in the host countries. In the 'astronaut family' in Vancouver, 'the man of the household ... returns shortly after immigration to Asia to work ... returning periodically for rest and recuperation in Vancouver' (Waters 2003). Parents who fly frequently between Asia and the USA to manage their transnational businesses on both sides of the Pacific are described as 'astronauts' (Zhou 1998).
- 2 The author takes the view taken by Yeoh, Huang and Lam (2005) that 'we need a much more complex and imaginative vocabulary to make sense of transnational families'. The term '*dan qi ma ma*' was coined by me for 'lone mothers' who stay with their children during their education, while the migrant men moved back to Taiwan or other countries to make a living (Chiang 2004). Likewise the term '*dan qi pa pa*' can mean 'lone father' but this arrangement has not been common in Australasia, nor in Canada.
- 3 Between 26 August and 11 September 2005, the author interviewed twenty women, out of which eighteen were 'astronaut wives' in Toronto. In the following year, twelve 'astronaut wives' were interviewed from 2 to 14 February 2006 in Vancouver.
- 4 This is a direct translation from the Chinese term '*tien ya*' which refers to the style of teachers forcing the child to learn as much as he/she can, engaging the student in rote memorization, and meeting requirements of examinations.
- 5 Canada is regarded by Chinese as 'Maple Leaf country'. The true name of the 'Maple Card' is the Permanent Residency Card, which is proof of a person's status as a landed immigrant. The permanent resident should stay

- long enough to qualify for sufficient residency requirements for citizenship application. The term 'sitting in immigrant prison' was created in Hong Kong to describe those who were obliged to fulfil residency.
- 6 This is commonly used by Taiwanese as a communication device with the computer and would not cost money. It is generally understood in Taiwan.
 - 7 The term 'study mother' has been used by Huang and Yeoh (2005) with regard to mothers from the PRC who accompany their children to Singapore during the course of the latter's study, while leaving their spouses at home.

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Abstract translations

«Les familles astronautes»: les vies transnationales de Taïwanaises mariées de classe moyenne vivant au Canada

Malgré l'intérêt accru pour la recherche sur les migrants en provenance de Taiwan, le concept fondamental et la méthodologie ne tiennent pas compte du genre. Le recensement exclut systématiquement les femmes qui ont émigré avec leurs maris et abandonné leur pays pour gagner leur vie ailleurs. La plupart des «épouses astronautes» étudiées dans le cadre de cette recherche sont issues de la classe moyenne et avaient mené une carrière à Taiwan avant d'être contraintes à l'émigration au Canada, leur pays d'accueil, où elles se consacrent entièrement à une nouvelle vie de femmes au foyer. Cette recherche soulève les questions de fonds suivantes: (1) Quelles sont les circonstances entourant la migration des familles taïwanaises? (2) Que font les «épouses astronautes»/«dan qi ma ma» taïwanaises pour bien s'adapter à leur nouvel environnement? (3) Comment évolue la relation avec leurs maris, enfants et la communauté taïwanaise pendant les étapes du processus d'adaptation? Des entrevues auprès de trente femmes de familles «astronautes» ont été menées à Toronto et Vancouver en 2005 et 2006 sur la base d'un questionnaire semi-directif, d'entretiens

ethnographiques et d'observation participative. Il en ressort le constat que la migration ne leur donne pas la possibilité de s'affranchir des rôles familiaux traditionnels de Taiwan, mais leur permette toutefois de se constituer des réseaux sociaux d'une grande importance dans leurs nouvelles vies.

Mots-clefs: «épouses astronautes», vies transnationales, communauté taïwanaise, Canada.

'Familias astronautes': las vidas transnacionales de las mujeres Taiwanesas casadas de clase media en Canadá

A pesar del aumentante interés en el estudio de los migrantes de Taiwán, el concepto y la metodología subyacentes permanecen ciegos al género. Invisibles en el censo son las mujeres que emigraron con sus maridos, dejando atrás su país adoptado para hacer una vida en otro lugar. Muchas de las 'esposas astronautas' estudiadas en esta investigación son mujeres de clase media que tenían carreras en Taiwán antes de emigrarse, pero que se convirtieron en amas de casa al llegar a Canadá, el país acogedor. Las preguntas importantes planteadas para esta investigación son las siguientes: (1) ¿Cuáles son las circunstancias de la migración para las familias taiwanesas? (2) ¿Cómo hacen frente a los desafíos del nuevo entorno las 'dan qi ma ma'/'esposas astronautas'? (3) ¿Cómo son las relaciones entre ellas y sus maridos, sus hijos y la comunidad taiwanesa durante el proceso de adaptación? Treinta mujeres de familias 'astronautas' fueron entrevistadas en Toronto y Vancouver en los años 2005 y 2006, utilizando un cuestionario semiestructurado, entrevistas etnográficas y métodos de observación de participantes. Se descubrió que la migración no les ha liberado de los papeles familiares tradicionales de Taiwán, pero, sin embargo, les ha permitido construir nuevas redes sociales, las cuales juegan un papel importante en la nueva vida de las mujeres.

Palabras claves: 'esposas astronautas', vidas transnacionales, la comunidad taiwanesa, Canadá.

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