

10 'Coming to China Changed My Life' Gender Roles and Relations among Single British Migrants

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During the 1950s, unmarried British men who were posted to Hong Kong to work for the Hong Kong Bank lived in Bank accommodation on Victoria Peak and were not allowed to marry during their first four-year posting (Interview with Stewert, banker, August 1999).¹ Such company control over the private lives of their employees echoes the ways in which wives were regarded and utilised by their husband's employers encompassed in the concept of 'the incorporated wife' (Callan and Ardener 1984). Just as other chapters in this volume challenge and deconstruct this concept, so this chapter will examine more recent trends among unmarried British migrants to China, now living and working in a supposedly much more liberal environment in relation to gender.

As capital has become more mobile and companies have sought to take advantage of new markets or production possibilities, international mobility for some sections of the population has become easier. The labour mobility of highly-skilled migrants has not only increased, the institutionalised nature of the mobility has also changed. The expatriate posting and associated remuneration package still exists, but as the hardship of many 'overseas postings' becomes less and competition increases, highly-skilled migrants are increasingly being employed on 'local' contracts.

In his interview, Stewert also described the changes in gender hierarchies in the banking sector since he arrived in Hong Kong in the 1950s to work in a bank. In the 1950s 'You had the girls doing normal secretarial type work', while in the 1960s, some women (or, as Stewert terms them, 'girls') were employed in more skilled clerical work checking documents. It was only in the 1980s that women began to appear in managerial roles. Such changes in banking and other sectors in many parts of the world have meant that women are able to participate in highly-skilled migration as single or 'lead' migrants, rather than as 'accompanying spouse/partner'. However, as significant research has demonstrated, gender is still a key variable in examining the characteristics of highly-skilled migration flows as well as the experiences of migrants.

The phrase 'coming to China changed my life' is taken from an interview we conducted with an unmarried British woman working in mainland

China. Such sentiments were common among both male and female migrants, who were keen to stress the opportunities and challenges which living and working in China presented. However, as we will argue below, such a representation of the movement from the UK to China is based on an understanding of 'migration' as referring purely to the actual process of moving from one place to another, and a suggestion that such spatial displacement leads to a disconnection with what went before (Halfacree and Boyle 1993) and what may come after. Examining migrants' experiences, however, reveals how this relocation is framed by broader social processes, such as gendered norms, which have both spatial and temporal dimensions. For migrants, spatial mobility can illuminate what were previously thought of as gender-neutral environments and lead them to reflect on their positions in both the 'host' society and 'back home'. In addition, this research highlights how these reflections concern not just the past and the present, but also future expectations about work and home life. Gender is a significant dimension of how these reflections and expectations are framed and will be the focus of this chapter.

In this chapter, we will examine these ideas by considering the experiences of single British men and women who have migrated to mainland China or Hong Kong for work in managerial or professional occupations. While for most, the Chinese experience is a very positive and rewarding one, moving to China does not always allow for liberation from previous expectations, structural constraints, or inequalities. In this chapter we will focus on the gendered nature of migrants' experiences. While women are no longer migrating predominantly in the guise of an 'incorporated wife', gender remains key in any examination of migrants' lives.

GENDER AND HIGHLY-SKILLED MIGRATION

A gendered approach to migration has become increasingly common since the early 1990s (e.g., Boyle and Halfacree 1999; Buijs 1993; Chant 1992; Kelson and DeLaet 1999; Kofman 2000; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Silvey 2004; Thapan 2005; Willis and Yeoh 2000). Given the numerical dominance of low-skilled and unskilled migration across national borders, the focus on these migration flows in relation to gender is unsurprising. The work on domestic labour, for example, has been particularly widespread (e.g., Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lutz 2002; Momsen 1999; Parreñas 2001). Work investigating the gendered nature of highly-skilled labour migration has been less common, but is growing (e.g., *Geoforum* 2005; Hardill 1998, 2002; Kofman 2000; Kofman and Raghuram 2006; Walsh 2005; Willis and Yeoh 2002; Yeoh and Willis 2004).

While highly-skilled migrants usually have greater freedom of international mobility than their lower-skilled or unskilled counterparts (see, for

example Ong's 1999 work on 'flexible citizenship'), the notion of a frictionless world resulting from economic privilege has been greatly challenged. As Ley (2004: 158) states 'Global space it turns out is not an isotropic surface of sameness after all,' rather, migrants' lives are embedded and grounded in particular places (see also Conradson and Latham 2005b).

This embeddedness is gendered (as well as being shaped by other axes of difference), with the experiences and opportunities available to women and men framed by power inequalities at a range of scales. Much of the work on gender and highly-skilled migration has focused on the problems women face in having their qualifications recognised (Iredale 2005), as well as issues around dual-career households and the intra-household negotiations that may arise regarding overseas postings or emigration (Salaff and Greve 2004). There is also a significant amount of work (including a number of chapters in this volume) which engages with the lives of women who accompany their husbands overseas and who do not enter paid work after migration. Thus, for many highly-skilled women, international migration is associated with shifts in gender roles and the concomitant reconfiguration, or in some cases reinforcement of gender identities (Yeoh and Willis 1999, 2005). Within gender studies of highly-skilled migration, a focus on women's roles as wife and mother, alongside that of worker has led to a significant absence of research on gender roles and relations among unmarried migrants (although see Thang, Maclachlan, and Goda 2002; Walsh 2005; Willis and Yeoh 2003). By framing research around a production/reproduction dichotomy and an associated gender division of labour, gender and migration research is in danger of leaving out key dimensions of gendered migration experiences (see also Kofman and Raghuram 2006 regarding studies of skilled migration and social reproduction beyond the household). This chapter aims to contribute to redressing this imbalance.

The ever-expanding volume of work on transnational and diasporic connections highlights the ways in which migrants are continually reshaping their relationships with family and friends elsewhere, as well as maintaining feelings of attachment and nostalgia for places (e.g., Levitt, Wind, and Vertovec 2003; Vertovec 2001). Thus, migration is not a discrete event, separate from what went before and what will come after the physical relocation. The creation and maintenance of transnational and translocal ties is often highly gendered, with men and women doing different forms of 'work' (e.g., Goldring 2001; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Willis and Yeoh 2002). Thus, while migrants may represent themselves as breaking free of previous constraints through movement overseas, these economic, political, and emotional links across transnational space provide moorings which may at times feel reassuring, while at others are restricting (Conradson and Latham 2005a).

While the focus of the chapter is on unmarried migrants, relationships and marriage are not excluded from the discussion. As we have argued elsewhere in relation to Singaporean migrants in China (Willis and Yeoh

2003), for many individuals, migration decisions are made within a broader context of social and personal expectations about 'settling down'. This again fits into the construction of migration, not as a discrete event, but rather potentially as one stage in a trajectory involving both transience and permanence. Kenyon (1999) highlights a similar process with reference to university students who live temporarily within institutional accommodation, and compare this with the permanence of the parental home and the expected settled home of the future.² For many single migrants, the perceived transience of time 'away from home' provides opportunities for new experiences and challenges. Spatial dislocation may represent freedom, but such freedoms are constructed and understood in relation to the perceived constraints and permanence of past and future lives.

Relationships between expatriate men and 'local' (although often also migrant) women, have been the subject of significant research in the context of colonialism (e.g., McClintock 1995). A focus on gender, migration, and sexuality is also found in more recent work on skilled migration, highlighting the complex networks of gendered and racialised discourses, played out on the bodies of both men and women (Farrer 2006; Walsh 2005). While highly-skilled migrants may hold positions of economic privilege relative to the majority of the 'host' society, this does not mean that relationships between migrants and local people are the same for migrant men and women; rather, gendered norms and expectations are played out in the spheres of intimacy created by such relationships.

The rest of the chapter will consider these issues of gender and skilled migration by unmarried men and women within the context of British migration to mainland China and Hong Kong. The following section will outline the study's methodology and provide a brief overview of British migration to China. We will then consider the gendered nature of the migration experience from the perspective of unmarried Britons.

METHODOLOGY

Between 1998 and 2001, we interviewed 47 unmarried British migrants (25 women and 22 men) as part of a larger study of British and Singaporean skilled migration to China. 'Unmarried' in this context refers to individuals who were not married at the time of migration, although some did marry during their time overseas or were in long-term co-habiting heterosexual relationships. The vast majority of the interviews took place in Shanghai (12 interviewees), Beijing (11 interviewees), Guangzhou (7 interviewees), and Hong Kong (12 interviewees), but five people who had been in Hong Kong were interviewed in Singapore (2 interviewees) and in the UK (3 interviewees). Interviewees were found through snowballing, using a range of personal contacts, as well as British embassies in China, British business associations, British social clubs, and company human resources

departments. A basic interview schedule was followed for each interview, but respondents were free to bring up any topic that they felt useful. Almost all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Some interviewees felt happier without the tape recorder, so detailed notes were written up immediately after the meeting. Interviews took place in a range of locations, including workplaces, bars, restaurants, and homes. We were also able to participate in social and sporting activities in mainland China and Hong Kong, including formal events organised by bodies such as the British Chamber of Commerce or the British Embassy, as well as more informal social gatherings in expatriate bars, coffee shops, or private residences. By using ethnographic methods of participant observation, we were able to gain insights into the lives of unmarried British expatriates, such as forms of socialising both within expatriate communities, as well as between Britons and the local Chinese population.

The vast majority of Britons living and working in China are based in the rapidly-growing cities of the eastern provinces because these are the focus of foreign direct investment into the country (Wu and Radbone 2005; Zhao, Chan, and Sit 2003). Gaining reliable data about the number of Britons in China was very difficult, not least because there is no formal system of collecting entry data in China and UK-based statistics such as the National Passenger Survey do not provide sufficient detail. During our time in China, we drew on a range of sources to estimate the number of Britons in China. These included interviews with consular staff and members of British associations. Following this process, we estimated that in 2000 there were between 25,000 and 27,000 Britons in the study areas, including about 16,000 in Hong Kong. While there will have been other small groupings of Britons elsewhere in China, such as Dalian, Tianjin, and Nanjing, as well as in locations further inland, the focus on Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou will have covered the main areas of British settlement. Since 2000 the Chinese economy has continued to grow at a rapid pace, with impressive increases in foreign direct investment. The expansion in service industries in Shanghai and Beijing has been particularly important for the employment of expatriates, but the manufacturing sector has continued to be significant.

Among our single migrants, most were employed on 'local' contracts in China, rather than being posted from the UK or elsewhere with a complete expatriate package. However, these 'local' jobs had been advertised internationally, or were internal posts within multinational companies, but with local contractual conditions. Most of our interviewees had arrived in China with a job arranged, although many had changed employment since arriving. Only four (two in Hong Kong and two in Shanghai) had ended up working in China having been originally 'travelling through' as part of a gap year or equivalent.³ In addition, five had originally come to China for language or music courses and three had started off working as

temporary English language teachers before moving into more permanent jobs in other professions.

Although they were on local contracts, this did not mean that they were paid the same wages as the local Chinese staff. They received higher wages and also, in some cases, assistance with accommodation and travel expenses. Most were employed in finance, law, marketing, advertising, or the hospitality industry, were aged in their late twenties when they first arrived in China and had been in China for three to five years. Only two of the single interviewees were British-born Chinese, the remainder being white British.

CHINA AS 'LIFE-CHANGING'

As we outlined earlier, discourses around the move to China being 'life-changing' were very common, with both men and women presenting China as a 'land of opportunity' compared to a stagnant, parochial, and depressing UK. Through physical mobility across international borders, migrants felt that they were freeing themselves from a number of chains, including economic problems, lack of career progression, family pressures, and social expectations, which they imagined would be their lot if they had not moved. For example, Andrew, a lawyer working in Hong Kong was very clear about wanting to escape from what he saw was a conventional 'mapped out' future:

And um, whilst I really liked the firm [a solicitor's firm in the City of London] and everything, I decided that the nitty gritty of what I did everyday didn't sort of interest me enough to sort of make me want to do it for the rest of my life, and, you know, things were going well and encouraging noises were already being made about partnership and all that sort of stuff. But, you know, I could see this sort of career being mapped out in front of me, you know, it looked like a conveyor belt to a wife and two point four children in Esher, you know, all be it, lots of sort of money and stuff, but I decided, well, do I really want that? (Andrew, lawyer, Hong Kong, early thirties, been in China for four years)

Moving to Hong Kong provided an escape route, but also plentiful opportunities to develop and diversify in career terms:

I think, you know, it's a great place to make money basically, that's one thing, but, you know, I've never been in work just for the money. But what I think its best, its best asset is the opportunity. You know as an expat, or even as a local out here, basically it's a very, very small pond, and you can be a big fish in a small pond here. You can get work, you

can get experience which you just would never get in London...I think its great asset is this sort of pool of opportunity.

Similarly, Jane's reflections on her time working in public relations in Hong Kong epitomise the ways in which this experience was represented by many of the interviewees:

It [going to Hong Kong] completely impacted my career. I had opportunities in Hong Kong I would never have had here. I had promotions in Hong Kong I never really had here. Without putting myself down I don't know that I would ever have got a job with [major media company] in London. Just because they are a blue-chip company that employs graduates who are the cream of the cream. In Hong Kong I was very unusual, they desperately wanted a Western girl to go out and look after these Western clients and their choice would have been very limited I'm sure. Here [in the UK] I would be one of thousands of women at my age who could go and do that job. What it did is it gave me the experience which now means I am much more indispensable in my work place because people don't have the experience that I have had; they haven't had the opportunity to work for a company like that. Because information technology is also new and the business of shifting information electronically is all very new I have comparable experience with most people in the industry. It has had a major impact on my whole life. Socially it has had a major impact because of the people I have met and the people I would never have known who live all over the world. It has widened my social circle of friends. I know an awful lot of lawyers, for instance; essentially from doing an arts degree I would not have had this mix of friends if I had stayed here. (Jane, public relations consultant, late twenties, spent two years in Hong Kong)

For many single migrants, both male and female, the career opportunities in China were very attractive and provided possibilities to work in sectors that would be closed to them back in the UK, or to progress much more rapidly than they would do at home. There was no indication that the move to China had been a response to failure in the UK, rather that China offered employment opportunities which were unavailable to them 'at home'. It was, in career terms 'life-changing'. We interviewed Jane after her return to the UK where she was working for a high-profile telecommunications company. The interview extract above shows that she felt her experience in Hong Kong was invaluable in allowing her to progress in a highly-competitive field.

Being in China and participating in social networks was certainly a way to find out about jobs that were often advertised very informally, if at all. However, entering these networks relies on a particular form of socialising, largely around pub and bar culture or sporting activities. While these

spaces and activities clearly have gender connotations, many of the single women we interviewed felt they were able to use these networks to their advantage, soon getting used to the more 'upfront' style of expatriate life in China where it was perfectly acceptable to start talking to strangers and to give them your business card. For example, one Shanghai interviewee explained:

But there's such opportunity to meet people at different functions. 'Coz in some ways our friends out here, you're not always working but you're always networking.... Whereas in the UK, you know, if you go out at night you don't talk about work or you don't do work, whereas here, people are much more, kind of, their work's on their mind.... And there's a lot of the name card giving, you've probably noticed that?... At night, you could be out in a bar and you're giving out your name cards and taking a few in, so you tend to meet a lot of new people as well that way. (Jinny, relocation consultant, Shanghai, late mid-twenties, been in China for about a year, originally worked in a bar)

The ways in which women talked about this process as something they would never dream of doing back in the UK, contrasted with the way men presented these activities as a normal part of their working lives regardless of location.

Over time many Britons said that they became jaded by the bar and pub focus of expatriate life and as they developed a group of friends, they often began to focus their social lives around more intimate social gatherings at home or non-bar focused activities. This was not necessarily associated with finding a partner and settling down, but rather, a reaction to the physical effects of late night partying and the perceived stresses associated with constantly meeting new people and never really getting to know them. While the social life and excitement of meeting new people was something which all our interviewees appreciated when they arrived in China, over time most chose to shift the focus of their out-of-work activities. This did not mean an end to heavy drinking and partying, but rather a rationing of such activities to weekends or special occasions. For example, Eleanor, in response to questions about the social life in Hong Kong, said:

Personally I think I'm quite different in Hong Kong [than in the UK]. I tend to go out, I do go out and do the bars and everything else. But having been here for four and half years that gets slightly tedious after a while so my life revolves very much about sports that I do [netball, tennis, and swimming] ... so I have quite a social life that side of things.... I also go and do the cultural side so I'll go to the theatre, I'll go to a play...and I'll still go out and party all weekend or Thursday night or whatever. (Eleanor, advertising executive, Hong Kong, late twenties, been in China for nearly five years, arrived as a backpacker)

During the whole research period we only heard of one British single migrant who had felt so unable to 'fit in' with the hard-drinking, late night culture that is so prevalent that he decided to leave. This particular individual was a man in his twenties who had come to China to find out more about its culture and felt that sitting in bars with fellow Britons after a day in the office was no way to achieve this. Of course there are bound to have been many more, but compared with 'failed' postings among married couples where women are often identified as the main instigators of departure, it is interesting that it was a man who felt unable to fit in with his counterparts among younger, unmarried expatriates.

For women, another key issue which many brought up was how safe they felt in China compared to back in the UK. Single men never commented on this, while married men sometimes did, but only in relation to their children (see Valentine 1989 for a discussion of how women's mobility is affected by fear of crime). For single women, being able to walk around alone, even at night, in the heart of China's biggest cities, gave them a feeling of freedom which they realised they did not possess in Britain. For example, Helen, a publicity officer in Shanghai observed:

So that's one thing I can't quite fathom out, I always wondered. I mean I also feel very safe here, whereas I never feel safe in Britain. Now when I go back [to the UK] I'm just absolutely terrified when I walk down the street. And it's quite sad in a way, because when you're in your own country, you should feel safest. (Helen, publicity officer, Shanghai, early thirties, been in Shanghai for nearly six years, originally a student)

Britons' perceptions of safety were a reflection of the very low figures for attacks against Britons and their property. However, for many interviewees, they realised that this represented a privileged position, predicated on their 'whiteness' or socio-economic status because violence within Chinese society and against low-skilled migrant workers was much more common.

Helen's comments were matched by many others from women in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai. For them, moving to China exposed some of the more subtle ways in which their gender frames their lives and on which they rarely reflected. As Natasha Walter (1999) argued in *The New Feminism*, for many young women in the UK today, gender discrimination and sexism is often not recognised because legislation has changed the way many institutions function and young women feel that there are no restrictions on what they can do. Moving to China was an opportunity for some women to re-evaluate their gender position. The everyday experiences of moving warily around the city in the UK had become so normalised that the restrictions and constraints were no longer recognised. It was only by moving to a different environment where their gendered, racialised, and

class position provided new freedoms, that the specificities of gendered fear became more obvious.

In this section we have outlined a number of ways in which the move to China could be conceived of as 'life-changing'. However, this physical movement did not represent a one-off decision and a break with the past, rather migrants viewed their 'China experience' as part of a career and life path which provided certain opportunities which would have positive outcomes in the future. They were thus embedded in actual places in China, as well as intangible behavioural norms and future expectations.

GENDERED WORK

Although among our single migrants there were slightly more women than men, this was a reflection of our desire to gain about equal numbers of men and women, rather than a representative sample of the unmarried British expatriate population. In reality, among single migrants, women were overall in a minority, with estimates ranging from about a quarter to a third of single migrants being female. This difference is not, interviewees argued, a reflection of companies being unwilling to post women abroad, or to hire women as 'local hires'. Rather, it is a reflection of the sectoral distribution of employment opportunities for expatriate workers. The gendered nature of the workforce in the UK in terms of sectoral differences was clearly represented in China, with men dominating finance (McDowell 1997), engineering, and manufacturing employment, while women were much more likely to be found in marketing, recruitment, and hospitality, which are smaller, although rapidly-growing sectors. Joe, an engineer in Guangzhou, was typical of interviewees in his perceptions of the gender division of labour among expatriates:

KW: Are there many single women out here working? Or does it tend to be people like you? Does it tend to be single blokes?

J: No, it's mainly single blokes.

KW: Right, is that just 'coz of the kind of industries there are out here? Or is it 'coz they think women will faint in the heat?

J: No, no I don't think that's the reason. For my company in particular because it's, well basically we've all graduated as engineers, and the people who graduate from the UK as engineers tend to be predominantly males.... Officially [the company] is not, they say they're not a sexist or racist employer and actually in our office there is one woman engineer, expatriate engineer. (Joe, engineer, early thirties, Shanghai, been in China for two years, previously elsewhere in East Asia)

Given the opportunities for career advancement which many women felt existed in China as described in the previous section, women did not mention a 'glass ceiling' in terms of an upper limit of career progression. This could, of course, be a reflection of the age, domestic situation, and employment level of the women we interviewed. Higher up the career ladder and when issues around children and family responsibilities may be important, structures of disadvantage towards women may be revealed (see other chapters in this volume). Some women interviewees stressed that they had had no problems as a woman working with Chinese colleagues, comparing this with their own or friends' experiences elsewhere in East Asia, particularly Japan, where patriarchal norms were very obvious within the workplace (Thang et al. 2002).

The concept of the 'incorporated wife' includes a recognition of how certain employers have expected employees' wives to play a part in entertaining company clients (see Tremayne 1984 for a discussion of 'Shell wives'). While this dimension is clearly not appropriate for a discussion of single female migrants, the blurred boundaries between work and home are still evident, often with a strong gender dimension.

'Corporate entertaining' is very important in many sectors of business, and this is exacerbated within the Chinese context due to the importance of personal relationships and trust (*guanxi*) within business decisions and dealings with government officials. In Jane's quotation above, she stressed that she got the job because 'they [the company] desperately wanted a Western girl to go out and look after these Western clients and their choice would have been very limited I'm sure'. In her interpretation of the situation, the media company wanted to employ someone to liaise with their Western clients and felt that a white Western woman would be most appropriate. Jane is rather dismissive of her talents in this regard, implying that she, as a 'girl' only got the job because there was nobody else around, but she was clearly good at her job because she was working in a similar field when interviewed in London a year after she returned from Hong Kong. She did not question the fact that the company would prefer to hire a woman for this job, clearly feeling that liaising with clients and taking them out for dinners was something that a woman would do best.

Other forms of corporate hospitality often excluded women, although not always explicitly. For many companies, being able to take clients out on the golf course to talk business was an advantage. While increasing numbers of women are taking up the sport, it remains a predominantly male activity, particularly in the context of business golf. The rising popularity of golf in the East Asian region, meant that some companies organised golfing weekends away to attract clients. While no woman said that she was told she could not attend, women did not feel that they would be welcomed on these weekends.

Finally, other forms of business entertainment were sometimes offered and in these cases women felt very obviously excluded. Trips to pole-dancing clubs or strip clubs were sometimes part of the corporate golf weekends away, or more commonly, they were part of an evening's hospitality after a large dinner. Of course, such activities are not unique to business practices in China, but some interviewees said that this form of corporate hospitality was particularly important with Asian, especially Japanese, clients. Regardless of the ways in which particular essentialised discourses around Asian masculinity were used to justify visiting strip clubs, from the viewpoint of female colleagues they were either explicitly excluded, or they did not go because they felt too uncomfortable with the situation. In either case, the gendered nature of 'hospitality' results in women being excluded from opportunities which could assist them in progressing in their career. No women claimed that their career advancement had been hampered because of these patterns of socialising, but when talking about individual incidents, it was clear that they were concerned about being excluded from 'work-related leisure'.

In Shanghai, a number of women mentioned the Expatriate Professional Women's Society which had about a hundred members from a range of nationalities. Because of Chinese law, the organisation could not have Chinese members. For a number of British women in this organisation and also a similar group in Guangzhou, the chance to meet with other professional women was an opportunity for networking. While no women said that they were discriminated against in their workplace, they did highlight the benefits of meeting in a women-only space. It gave them a chance to network for business in an environment other than a bar or on the golf course, but it also provided a chance to make friends.

'BRIDGET JONES' IN CHINA

When describing the lives of single women in China, some interviewees, both male and female, drew on the character of Bridget Jones, Helen Fielding's creation, whose main preoccupations are the search for a boyfriend and the need to lose weight. It is in these more intimate spaces of sexual relationships and bodily appearance that gender differences and real antagonism were apparent and the Chinese experience was presented more as a troubling and upsetting one, than a liberating one by many of the women.

Being 'Western' was a clear bodily marker which usually gave women a more privileged position in Chinese society; for example, in jobs, but also in other interactions with 'local' Chinese people (Willis and Yeoh 2004). However, compared with 'local' Chinese women, or with female migrants from other parts of Asia, especially the Philippines, British women often felt large and ungainly. These feelings of unattractiveness are exacerbated by the often frank ways in which local Chinese women would discuss British

women's appearances. Nina, an IT administrator in Shanghai, described her experiences at the hairdresser's the day before:

Oh it's quite funny...I was at the hairdresser's, and they wash your hair and they do a massage for you.... And they, they massage your arms.... And she was, 'Oh you're so fat!'...I've known her for a while.... And she said, 'Oh you've got really fat, you've put on a lot of weight!' But I just kind of laugh about it you know, you've just got to laugh. And often you go into a shop and they don't even let you [stay], 'No, sorry, you're too fat'. 'I just want to look around'. 'No, no, we haven't got anything your size'. (Nina, IT administrator, Shanghai, late twenties, been in China for three years, originally as a student)

While Nina recounted these tales with arm and facial gestures to add to their comedic value, for other women, the feelings of being constantly judged in comparison with Asian women whom they view as petite, beautiful, and graceful, was very difficult. Not only does this affect their self-esteem in relation to their body image, but it also feeds into insecurities regarding sexual relationships.

Amber, a British woman in a relationship with a Chinese man, provided an overview of general perceptions and relationship experiences of Westerners in China:

I think especially with China and maybe it's the Orient in general that there are people who come here for specific things and with men it's... they either come here with their work and they're married already, they come here because they're interested in martial arts and not interested in any way, or they come here because they are interested in Chinese women, and that's really the three draw factors for foreign men! And it is, and that's probably why all the women I know are with Chinese men. Because it is very difficult, it's just impossible; it really is very difficult to find a decent, nice, foreign guy, who...is not into martial arts, or other women, or married! Yeah it is very difficult for people, and I think because often foreign women don't find Chinese men very attractive, I think that our expectation of what is attractive as a foreigner is very different from what most Chinese men look like, and especially when there were only certain types of people that you can get along with, and I think that it's difficult finding that in China, and I think that most single women that I met here, left, if they weren't into Chinese men they left. (Amber, health administrator, Beijing, late twenties, been in China for five years, originally teaching English)

Amber's discussion of Western men and their reasons for coming to China resonates with many of the sweeping comments made by single British women who bemoaned the lack of available men. As Amber suggests at

the end of the quotation, there are plenty of Chinese men, but most single British women do not find the prospect of having a relationship with a Chinese man an attractive one. At the time of the interview Amber was living with her Chinese boyfriend and their baby son, but she recognised that she was unusual in having chosen to have a relationship with a Chinese man. Her social circle largely consisted of Chinese friends and relatives, and a few expatriate women who were in relationships with Chinese men.

For British women, both single and married, discussions about relationships between expatriate men and local women invariably became very heated and often rather confrontational, with the men being presented as choosing appearance over intellect or personality, and the women's behaviour being described as either understandable because of their dire economic and social circumstances, or devious. There was no recognition of the fact that some relationships could be based on real understanding, intimacy, and love. Similar arguments were made among our Singaporean interviewees, where despite greater similarities in language and culture, relationships between Singaporean men and Chinese women were often viewed with suspicion and derision by other Singaporeans (Willis and Yeoh 2003).

Andrew, the lawyer in Hong Kong, was typical of male responses to such arguments, stressing the ways in which he felt British women were often being far too judgemental about these relationships:

I would generally, I would, I mean, you know, I basically um, you know, don't really find local women particularly attractive so I suppose I think it's OK but it's not something I can identify with, so, you know, I'd, you know, I'd agree generally that, you know, if, I mean well, I suppose a lot of it is that basically it is just sex for a lot of people so I suppose a lot of women who've come out with that reaction [criticizing expatriate men for their relationships with local women] would be just thinking it's just sort of blokes being blokes as it were. But, um, I would, I would generally think, yeah, fine, you know, if you get on with somebody and you can make it work then you know, fine, no particular problems, I would tend to agree with that. But, I have, I have heard the strongest reactions about these relationships from, um, Western women who are really damning about it, um, about blokes particularly, yeah, um, Chinese but particularly the Filipinas, probably because the Filipinas have a tendency some of them to be employed in slightly more sleazy occupations in some of the slightly less savoury parts of town...But, I mean I find that fascinating, [his British girlfriend] basically is incredibly vehement on this subject, and I've sort of gently put it to her that that attitude is rather de-valuing the women. Because, some women, some Western women put it on the basis that these guys are sad losers who go for second best. Now, why are Chinese women second best? They might be first best for him you know. That

involves a bit of a value judgment. Now, I suppose on the other hand, if it is some sad loser who's just picked some terribly submissive Chinese girl or some Filipina who's got half an eye on his wallet and is just completely, you know, sexual relationship with absolutely no depth to it at all then I can entirely understand the depth of feeling that might be aroused, um, but I find it quite fascinating.

The pauses and hesitations in Andrew's discussion are indicative of the way in which many interviewees approached this topic. There was wariness in being seen to make harsh judgements on the behaviour of others, while also feeling that in some cases something unsuitable was going on. The way that Andrew finishes this discussion suggests that his interpretation of some relationships may not be that dissimilar from that of many of the British women we interviewed, including Amber. However, the rage and disgust expressed by many British women on this subject probably reflects feelings of hurt, rejection, and insecurity in the face of singledom. Despite the frequent claims about China being a chance to escape from the parochialism and constraints of the UK, there were clearly some social norms and expectations which migrants continued to hold dear. In particular, marriage and children and some form of more permanent settlement were viewed as desirable. Thus, when women felt thwarted in their search for a partner, it was viewed as a barrier to achieving their longer-term personal goals.

Men also discussed their future plans and the possible constraints which being in China might bring them, but these comments were less common. Arnie, a hotel manager in Beijing, had been going out with a Chinese woman for a year when we interviewed him. While he was very positive about their relationship at that time and had introduced her to his visiting family and friends, he did admit that the future may not be as easy:

I'm sorry but guys like me and other people that's part of the relationship you've got with a 21-year-old [Chinese woman] that's giving you a lot of attention, you're not looking any further than having some fun, you're going to get that in abundance here [in China], but ultimately these relationships don't work, because there's no next level. I could not have taken my girlfriend to the British comedy show last night. That makes me uncomfortable about any potential future, in that relationship, because there's no way she would understand. She speaks fluent English, she speaks perfect English, I could speak to her at the same speed I'm talking to you, but that's a communication level, but emotionally, the humour, the next language step up, they [Chinese people] can't comprehend, they have no clue. If I make dry humour, my humour as a northerner is very dry, more sarcastic and aggressive, no lost, completely lost on her. So a very important part of my personality doesn't get across, and she's not receiving it, and I feel that these

sort of relationships, and I know a lot of them are like that they ain't going to work, but while you're here it's alright. (Arnie, hotel manager, Beijing, late twenties, been in China for two years, previously in the Middle East)

Despite the widespread discourse of 'unavailable men', and the need to 'return to the UK' to find a partner, among our 47 Britons who were single when they migrated, eleven (five women and six men) were married or about to be married at the time of the interview. Four of the women had married other Britons whom they met during their time in China, while the other, Sarah, was married to a Chinese man. Of the men, two married fellow British expatriates, while the other four married local Chinese women. All those who were marrying Chinese partners were planning to stay in China because they felt that this would be the most appropriate environment in which to live and bring up children. This was particularly the case for Sarah and her Chinese husband. Because of his limited English skills and qualifications, they had decided it would be better for them to stay in Beijing where he could continue to make significant economic contributions to the household. 'Settling down' for other migrants sometimes involved an end to the transient lifestyle with a return to the UK, while for others, regional locations, particularly Singapore and Australia were viewed as ideal destinations for a more settled family life. For example, Alicia (a bank IT consultant) and Peter (financial sector), met in Hong Kong, but we interviewed them in Singapore where they had moved after their marriage. When we asked Alicia about why they had moved to Singapore, she replied:

It's more conducive here [in Singapore] to couples, well the lifestyle is. Or if you're the sort of person who doesn't appreciate going out and partying all the time, cos really if you're not into drinking I'm not really sure what you do in Hong Kong.... Had had plenty of Hong Kong, been there 3 years plus whatever, had a good time, quite nice to live somewhere else. Slightly quieter pace of life, or higher standard of living really. I think that's what translates into quieter day-to-day life as well. Because if you're in more comfortable accommodation you're going to be content to spend more time in it. You're more likely to have more dinner parties and things like that, because you've got more space to entertain. (Alicia, bank IT consultant, early thirties, spent three years in Hong Kong)

The discussion of the way in which being in China affects women's perceptions of their appearance and the tensions around heterosexual relationships highlights the ways in which gendered behaviours and attitudes may be reinforced or reconfigured in a new setting. We are not arguing that self-esteem issues around appearance or conflicts regarding different

expectations between men and women in heterosexual relationships are unique to China or the migration experience, rather that the different context provides new dimensions and can make visible tensions and expectations which remain hidden 'at home'. For both single British men and women in their twenties and thirties, the idea of 'settling down' in terms of marriage was a common expectation. While being in China meant that for many men this life event was still very much a possibility, for many women, their perceived partnership opportunities were limited because of competition from Asian women.

BEING PART OF A FAMILY

The biographical approach to migration, as well as more recent work on transnationalism and diaspora encourages us to consider the ways in which our single migrants and their migration experiences are embedded in much broader networks of love, familial support, and friendship. Research on less-skilled migrants has stressed the importance of remittances in transnational social networks, particularly with kin (Conway and Cohen 1998; de Haas 2005), while work focusing on women migrants, especially domestic servants, has stressed the importance of transnational family strategies and transnational motherhood (Douglass 2006; Parreñas 2001; Waters 2002). Among more skilled migrants, such research has been less common (although see Willis and Yeoh 2002) and for single migrants, family relationships have often been ignored.

In practice, the migration of single people is not made within a family vacuum, rather family networks are usually important in both the decision-making process and the migration experiences. All the single Britons in our sample kept in touch with family members while they were in China and in many cases family and friends came to China to visit. However, in gender terms, it was the initial move which seems to have the clearest gender differences. None of the men interviewed said that their families were particularly concerned about them coming to China by themselves. This may have been because the interviewees did not want to present themselves as potentially vulnerable, but it may also have been because family members felt they would be able to cope with the challenges of China.

In contrast, a number of women reported the reactions of their parents, particularly their mothers, when they proposed going to China. Jinny, the relocation consultant in Shanghai described how enthusiastic her mother was about the opportunities that China offered, but that having a cousin to stay with in the city on arrival did much to assuage her fears:

KW: Yeah, wow. So what, so what did your family think about you moving out here?

J: They were really encouraging actually, yeah. Yeah, very encouraging, you know, just, my mum especially, you know, who I'm close to but was like, 'Yeah, go on and do it.'... 'I'd love to see you', you know initially it was for the three months, but, 'I'd love to see you go out there, do a job for a couple of years,' she knew it was work..., it would be really good for me.... But I have a cousin here as well. And that's initially who I stayed with, which I guess is peace of mind.... People would say, 'Oh wow, you're going out to Shanghai!' But having a member of family here makes a big difference.... At least you know somebody, and I guess for my family it was comfort for them as well. You know, 'cos I guess it is a bit daunting for a single girl.

Despite their adult status, parents are keen to maintain the care of their children, albeit in gendered ways reminiscent of the tighter parental control described for much younger children (Valentine 2004). While for the migrants, the move to China can be 'life-changing' and provides new opportunities, family ties remain an important link for emotional support.

In contrast to many of the older, married British migrants in China and most of the Singaporean interviewees in the wider study, very few of the single Britons mentioned family responsibilities as a reason for returning to the UK. While all said that their family was one of the things that they missed the most about being in China, they did not feel that they were neglecting family responsibilities 'at home'. Among our sample of older Britons, worries about parental health were often commented upon and were given as reasons for a planned return to the UK. For Singaporeans, cultural norms and state discourses about 'filial piety' meant that for many Singaporeans regardless of age and marital status, family responsibilities were highlighted much more frequently.

CONCLUSION

Changing forms of global capital, as well as momentous shifts in social norms regarding gendered behaviours in many countries have meant that women are increasingly involved in skilled labour migration in their own right. In this paper we have outlined some of the ways in which single British men and women have represented and experienced their migration to China. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the cities of coastal China in particular have provided opportunities for young skilled migrants from overseas. While coming to China may have changed the migrants' lives and provided new opportunities for economic and social development, the spatial displacement has not necessarily meant a detachment from previous social ties, norms, and expectations. Female migrants

are not the 'incorporated wives' at the beck and call of their husband's company as they were just a few decades ago, but gender remains an important dimension in structuring the experiences of migrant men and women. Coming to China may free women from certain social constraints in the UK, but the gendered nature of the workplace, public arenas, and leisure spaces is still apparent. In addition, while both male and female migrants are grounded in the economic, social, and cultural ties of particular cities in China, they are also entwined in transnational networks of people, values, and expectations. Migration can be 'life-changing', but it cannot be viewed in isolation from both what went before and what may happen in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for providing funding (Grant No: L214 25 2007) through the Transnational Communities Programme for this research.

NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. We are grateful to Maddy Dobson for bringing this literature to our attention.
3. A 'gap year' is a term used in the UK for a break from formal education or paid employment in order to travel or undertake voluntary work. It has traditionally been used to apply to time off in between school and university, or between university and employment, although this pattern is changing. For further details see Simpson (2005).

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